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COBALT-SERIES

マリア様がみてる

スール

妹オーディション

今野緒雪



集英社

Volume 20

Sister Audition

Prologue

“Good day.”

“Good day.”

The crisp morning greeting echoes clearly through the blue sky. Today too, the maidens who gather in Maria-sama’s garden with angelic and pure smiles will pass under the tall gate. They possess both innocent mind and body, wrapped in a deep-colored uniform. In order that the pleats in their skirts have not been tossed into disarray, and their white sailor-collars have not been blown back, walking slowly with grace is the way here. Of course, there are no students who would shame themselves by running so as to make it in the nick of time.

This is Lillian Private Academy for Girls.

Originally established in the thirty-fourth year of the Meiji era, it is said this school was for daughters of noblemen and still exists for young women in the traditional Catholic system.

In downtown Tokyo, amid Musashino, a district where a lot of greenery can still be found, watched by God from infancy through college, this integrated elevator school is able to nurture a garden of maidens.

The name of the era has changed three times, but even on this day in the Heisei-era, after eighteen years of a pure culture that a sheltered upbringing allows these women, they who seem to have been kept in a box are ready to be shipped out. Such a structure yet remains in this precious academy.

Why was this sort of thing likely to happen? Yumi absent-mindedly thought. I couldn’t have dreamed such a thing before yesterday, but I’d suddenly fallen into a mystery place.

For example...

I'd been spacing out while the starting pistol was ringing. When I finally took notice of my surroundings, what kind of race had begun with that sounding pistol? Already everyone had disappeared from that point on the map. In front of me I was able to see my friend's back shrinking in the distance.

Such speed... It was a busyness that made me dizzy. Although it was astonishing it was necessary to look, and when I noticed, I too was seriously running. That's the feeling I got.

Well, during your lifetime, there will occasionally be unexpected circumstances that are likely to involve you. There's no numerical formula for them, but in a sense it's assuredly more difficult than balancing simultaneous equations.

What is it?

When you're able to really investigate it thoroughly, that's your life.

Audition

It started with something Yoshino-san had said.

“At this rate, I can’t find anything left to do but hold an audition...”

Yoshino-san said, while holding a fist up to her face for emphasis with no warning.

So someone who had been listening to Yoshino-san could only think of it as “sudden”. For some time now, Yoshino-san had been vacillating back and forth in her heart about something with a “No not this” or a “Not this either”.

“Aw?”

“Audition.”

Before Yumi asked Yoshino-san about what the auditions were about, Yoshino-san added “About our petite sœurs of course”.

“Our petite sœurs... Our sisters?!”

Without thinking, Yumi stopped wiping the table. An audition. When she thought about it, the first thing that came to mind was a search, a production meant to find new talent. It was a place where actresses would go to get into movies and dramas, where they would find out their market price. Yumi, who had nothing to do with this world of talent, hadn’t given something like this a single thought.

No, wait. Someone who had graduated had used an audition like this before. Maybe it was during the Student Council Elections, something about Yamayurikai body auditions or something like that.

“Well, if you think so strongly about an audition, we won’t be able to get petite sœurs by the time we’re third-years.”

Yoshino-san said, while opening the window.

It was the first Monday of November. After school, at the Rose Mansion.

The second-year Boutons had gathered to finish the mansion’s cleaning. Even stately Noriko-chan had her courage drain as she heard Yoshino-san’s Audition Declaration, as she faltered while holding the electric teakettle. Or maybe she was just guiding our planning.

“When you say ‘we’, are you including me in it?”

“Of course.” Yoshino-san answered, as she returned from the window.

“We’re in similar positions, aren’t we? Haven’t both of our Onee-samas commanded us to find petite sœurs?”

“Uh, well.”

Yumi minced her words.

Actually, only recently, Yumi’s Onee-sama Ogasawara Sachiko-sama had just commanded her “Please find a petite sœur”. She had had no reason to keep such an important request to herself and quietly accept such a request without shock, so she had told Yoshino-san.

“If you analyze the situation, Sachiko-sama had been put under a lot of pressure in last year’s sœur problems, and in that strain produced a petite sœur. So I thought Yumi-san would not want to go through that herself. So it’s like a kind of kindness.”

But Yumi thought while listening to Yoshino-san’s explanation “Then why haven’t you found a petite sœur for yourself by now”.

“But with Rei-chan, it was completely different. Because Rei-chan had made me her petite sœur from the start of the first term, she didn’t feel any pressure, so she didn’t pressure me. She probably forgot completely about the whole pressuring thing.”

“I don’t think she really forgot.”

Because just yesterday Rei-sama had just said “I want to hear some good news from you soon.”

But really, it seemed as if Yoshino-san’s Onee-sama Hasekura Rei-sama had still not directly said anything to her little sister about finding a petite sœur. But because Yoshino-san was being pressured from a different direction, it felt to her as if her goose was cooked, and she needed to find a petite sœur quickly.

“Right now, the Rose Mansion has a shortage of first-years. You see? Last year around now, there were Shimako-san, you, and I. There were three of us. Now look how many there are.”

Noriko-chan was the only one.

“It’s like a shortage of wives in a village. Soon this place will be deserted. Is that what you want, Noriko-chan?”

Yoshino-san remarked as soon as Noriko-chan had turned towards us.

“That’s a troubling situation.”

Yoshino-san’s question was the unsaid trap. By next year, if everything went according to plan, the second-years would become Roses, and Noriko-chan would be the only Bouton. It was understandably a grave situation, no matter how capable a person you put in that spot.

“Now that I think about it, I don’t think I’ve ever met someone I’d like.”

Yoshino-san said after depositing herself in a chair. She had gotten into full conversation mode. Because Yumi had finished washing the sink, she sat down in the chair next to Yoshino-san. The Rose Mansion’s cleaning had finished.

“Speaking of meeting, how about someone from Kendo club?” asked Yumi, upon which Yoshino-made a strained face.

“I’m very perky right? But even though I have all that energy, and even though the old man next door runs a Kendo Dojo, I’m still just a real beginner. I’d only be able to ask someone of a lower Kendo rank than me to be my sœur.”

“So basically, if she’s better than you at Kendo, you wouldn’t let her be your sœur?”

“That’s about right.”

Because Yoshino-san was a dominating person, she didn’t want to feel slighted in her sœur relationship.

“And also the girls who stick to their club sport from the very beginning of the first term of their first year rise up quickly.”

“That’s true. You joined during the monsoon season, right?”

When Yoshino-san had been considering whether or not to start club activities, her relationship with Rei-sama had become very stormy. But Yumi herself had been overflowing with her own issues, so she didn’t even have the slightest idea of what had happened between them.

“But I’ll bet there’s some first-year in the club who looks at Yoshino-sama from afar and thinks ‘She’s so cool’”

“There’s no first-year who would think of a girl who tires out during stretches to be cool.”

“Well, there must be...”

Yumi’s follow up was interrupted by Yoshino-san’s declaration.

“Plus, Rei-chan has a lot of curiosity...”

“Rei-sama...”

“The person who becomes my sœur will be like a granddaughter to Rei-chan.”

“I see. So someone who can play the part affectionately.”

Of course, I nodded. One couldn’t definitively say that there were no girls who would do such things, as the very ones who did were often the ones who could not be recognized. I had also admired Rei-sama at first, but as time went by, I began to like Yoshino-san and see Rei-sama her way.

“Ah, back in the glory days before the Yellow Rose Revolution. I was thought to be the best first-year sœur there could be.”

Yoshino-chan said as she turned her head towards Noriko-chan. Noriko-chan who, had not known the Yoshino-chan before the great change, made a face showing that she thought it were all a lie. But Yoshino-san’s words had no untruth to them, they were all true.

“Yumi-san has it easy here though. She’s popular among the first-years.”

“Popular? No, I’m just a bit familiar with everyone.”

Come to think of it, in the midst of the expensive cultivated roses inside the greenhouse, there was one dandelion growing alone. Like a walnut-shaped button made of cotton amongst a group of jewels. That was the feeling I had felt.

“You say you aren’t, but around you, you have Tōko-chan and Kanako-chan. Ah, You don’t really like one over the other do you?”

“Like one or the other? Well, either way, I don’t own either.”

“It was just a suggestion. I don’t want them to simply be trinkets of Yumi-san. That’s why I have no better option but to grope out some idea for myself.”

“That’s”

“Audition, it’s an audition! A Sœur Audition!”

Yoshino-san once again clenched her fist and raised it into the air, the moment when the room’s door opened with a creak.

“Huh? You want to choose a sœur through some auditions?”

Just as I was thinking this was a good idea, in came Sachiko-sama. As always, she sat in her seat with beauty and grace, and sipped Noriko-chan’s prepared black tea. “So?” she said, as Yumi turned her head towards Sachiko-sama.

“Please make no mistake regarding my intentions, Onee-sama. Yoshino-san will be the one doing the auditions.”

If Yumi did not clarify her on position on the audition, something bad would happen. So Yumi forcefully declared her inclinations.

“Hmm, and you will be doing?”

“Eh?”

“You won’t be joining in? Like Yoshino-chan, you too have no sœur, Yumi.”

“I, I know, but...”

But, when Yumi thought about it, was it right to finish what she was saying? Yumi had been thinking “That’s a bit strange”, but when she followed the unwavering line of sight from Sachiko-sama’s eyes, it read “What if this were the more honorable path?”

“W... Wait a second, Onee-sama.”

But then, Sachiko-sama harshly corrected me. Why had things gone this way.

“Because you cannot meet the girls, you can hold an audition. Isn’t that nice? I wonder why I hadn’t thought of the idea before.”

Hands crossed on her chest, Sachiko-sama sighed, as neighboring Yoshino-san added “I’m done waiting.”

“Sachiko-sama, I’m worried. Even together with Yumi-san, would we have any applicants for the auditions?”

For some reason or the other, they would come. In spite of this being a vote on one issue, there may be some dissidents, but Yumi cheered Yoshino-san on. Fight fight, Go! Go! and such.

“Ah, that doesn’t sound like the Yoshino-chan we know. Isn’t it better if more people attend? But, the main question is, can you chance upon a suitable partner for yourself in that crowd? It’s possible that in spite of a hundred people attending, you don’t find a suitable partner. There was only one person for you, and no replacing that sœur.”

“That’s true, but...”

People whose feelings dashed ahead of their words, when hit by reasonable arguments, will not stop. Yoshino-san was not able to put up a good defense, her words fading away.

There was nothing she could do. Nothing to do but fight by herself.

“Uh... Onee-sama, my opinion is,”

“Opinion?”

Sachiko-sama looked at Yumi brusquely.

“It’s that an audition isn’t necessary, right? Because there must be other first-years out there willing to be our sœurs?”

“Well, no.”

“Well, if that’s what you want to say, then we’re talking about something completely different. Please follow Yoshino-chan. But if you plan not to go with her, then while Yoshino-chan does that, then you should use the time instead to gather your own sœur candidates Yumi. I’ve given up on waiting for you.”

“Uh...”

Now what to do. She had probably said the most appropriate thing to say at that time. But that’s right. She remembered. In her fervor, Yumi stood up and spoke.

“Onee-sama. Your insistence on these sœur recruitments is some sort of idiocy.”

Swish.

She had made her decisions... Hadn’t she? No, it seemed wholly bad for her. Yoshino-san turned her head away with a look on her face that said “She’s done it now” and Sachiko-sama laughed.

“Sœur recruitments? You misunderstood me Yumi. I had simply played the bad person to push my cute little sister into some good.”

“Played the bad person?”

Yumi’s question was rude, but she could not see it.

“If you find it cruel, then leave the room and search for one please. Maybe your unexpected sœur is waiting for you outside the door.”

“So you want me too to look for some gold in the straw?”

“What does that mean?!”

With Sachiko-sama’s obvious eyebrow-raising, Yumi understood that she herself had forgotten being called ‘Warashibe Chōja’.

“Understood. I’ll search. It’ll be best if I search.”

Yumi rose again in passion, but she had no reason to meet her spoken goal. It’s just that the room’s mood had caught her on fire, and she needed to quench herself out.

Just about a year ago, Sachiko-sama had herself been thrust into some painful circumstances by the former Rosas and had stormed out of the room in anger. That was when Yumi had coincidentally decided to visit the Rose Mansion so, as she was walking together with Shimako-san, who was being her guide, she had collided with Sachiko-san as she left the room. It seemed that humans, when pushed into action by something, go down paths that they cannot fully understand.



If God has prearranged a sœur for me, then I probably would not be able to see her standing outside of the door.

As Yumi was opening the door, the knob began escaping from her grip. As soon as she began understanding that someone from the other side was opening the door, Shimako-san's face became visible. As soon as Shimako-san saw an overly excited Yumi storm out of the door, Shimako-san quickly dodged out of the way.

Come to think of it, was the person beside Shimako-san this sœur of fate? Ah, so there really was a person there, Yumi thought, as she finally collided with her.

There was no going back.

She had readied herself, and closed her eyes.

As she collided with a warm object and both of them fell onto the floor, for some reason Yumi could not feel the impact. Yumi opened her eyes.

“Yumi-chan, sorry...”

It was Rei-sama's worried face.

“Because you collided into me, I could take the impact, but if I had been a regular girl, it would have been a disaster.”

Sachiko's didactic reply could be heard from back in the room.

“She is a girl who does not understand whether she has or does not have luck.”

Maria-sama's Star

Part 1.

“So, when are you holding it?”

Sachiko-sama asked, as she curled her fingers around her neck.

“I’m thinking about next Saturday”

Answered Yoshino.

Rei-chan, who was acting like a human shield, caused Yumi-san to take a U-turn into the room, her face holding a sunken in countenance, as she meekly seated herself next to Sachiko-sama. Whether she had a mountain of things she wished to say, or whether she could not find anything to say, Yumi-san could not take any actions when her Onee-sama was in opposition to her inclinations.

“Well.”

Sachiko-sama had whispered the words “Saturday after next,” nuanced in a way to prompt Yoshino to answer whether it was too early or too late.

Saturday was the only day where Yoshino had more than ten minutes to spare after school. But the weekend after next there was a Kendo match, so she could not do it. But if the audition were to be held before then, it would be too sudden.

So one would think that any day after the Kendo match would be fine, but one look at Yoshino’s schedule would show that such planning was simply naive. But she needed to hold an appropriate time for the auditions. Just as one needed to be on time to meet at a Kendo match, so Yoshino planned to have the sœur auditions to be on time with finding a sœur.

“What is this about?”

As soon as everyone had been seated, Sachiko-sama reopened the matter for discussion, when Rei-chan asked the question, knowing nothing about the exchanges that had preceded this. Shimako-san, who had arrived at the same time as Rei-chan, also inclined her head to wonder about what was going on.

“I wanted to find a sœur.”

Yoshino said, in the same nonchalant tone as she had said “Saturday is okay.”

“A sœur?!”

Rei-chan was the one who showed her surprise. The others were more dumbfounded than they looked, and could not interfere with the others’ conversation in their shock. And so the Yellow Rose conversation continued.

“Whhhhhhhho is this person you want as sœur?!”

“I don’t know.”

“If you don’t know, then I obviously know less!”

“That’s why I’m holding an audition!”

“I never heard about this!”

“You haven’t. But I was just talking about this!”

“Yoshinooo.”

Rei-chan pushed herself up and struck the table, her face flushed in anger. She sat back down in a frenzy that felt as if it would break the chair, after which she began hitting her forehead upon the desk. Yoshino, who was being opposed in all of this, sat in her seat calmly with a genteel demeanor, and watched her Onee-sama’s scene.

As Yumi watched the scene, (unlike Rei-chan) she found dry surprise when she confirmed the fact that Yoshino had probably not told Rei-chan about the audition.

“Yoshino... Why so suddenly...”

“It’s not suddenly. I had been thinking of it for a long time. What’s wrong, do you not like the idea?”

“It’s not that, I just wasn’t mentally prepared...”

“Why do you talk about being mentally prepared now? Isn’t it the quick news that you had wanted to hear? Just as you had hoped, I’ll be able to show the person whom I bond with to you.”

“That’s, well if you put it that way it’s... But...”

Rei-chan was flustered and fidgety.

Like a father whose daughter would marry. When looking at Rei-chan from afar, that is exactly how she seemed.

“Plus, you can’t really find a perfect sœur at an audition.”

“Oh really? Rei-chan understands these things, does she?”

Rei-chan herself understood that there was no concrete basis for all of this. So she couldn’t really say anything else.

Rei-chan lapsed into silence in Yoshino-san’s wake. As the dry silence dragged out into a sort of armistice, Shimako-san asked a question in a soft voice.

“But Yoshino-san. What if you cannot find a sœur with an appropriate fit at the audition?”

“That won’t happen. Even if I’m a bit uneasy, I’ll still choose.”

Yoshino’s brusque answer circulated whispers throughout the room. It won’t happen? She’ll choose in spite of being uneasy? This was all a very surprising turn of events.

“What happened, Yoshino-san?”

“Nothing.”

“You’re lying. Something is pushing you to hurry.”

Good job Rei-chan, she had even phrased it as if she were praising Yoshino. One look at Yoshino showed that she was the one flustered and fidgety.

“I just want to hurry...”

Yoshino closed her eyes. This action alone confirmed that Yoshino had been telling a lie.

Yoshino promptly closed her mouth, and Rei-chan let out a large sigh.

“Fine, I understand. I’ll agree with your audition. But do it next month. I have to practice for my Kendo meet, so when that is over, we can make a perfect plan on how to hold the audition. I’ll help you with the work too of course.”

“But then I won’t make it on time.”

From here on, Yoshino's war changed.

Any more persistence on Yoshino's part would have been pointless. That there was a time limit, and that if too much time passed by, the audition would become pointless could be seen in Yoshino's eyes. Approaching Rei-chan with these conditions and making Rei-chan her ally would be an effective plan for Yoshino.

"What's going on here?"

Rei-chan put her answer to Yoshino's last remark on hold and asked her about the incident. The words of the person responsible's name then came out of Yoshino's mouth.

"Yesterday, no actually from a long time back, I met with Eriko-sama."

"When is this?"

"Around the Athletic Festival."

"Eriko-sama was there?"

"Yeah."

Rei-chan turned towards Sachiko-sama with a face that asked "Did you know?". Sachiko-sama shook her head in a way that said that she was learning about this for the first time. Shimako-san too informed everyone that she had known nothing about this. Noriko-chan had of course never met Eriko-sama, and so she could not be asked. For some reason, the question stopped being asked after that, so Yumi-san was not asked. Yumi may be made to answer, thought Yoshino.

The way it had been said, it seemed as if Eriko-sama had only met Yoshino and then left.

Yoshino went on.

"I think Eriko-sama wasn't very happy when I met her. Eriko-sama told me to work hard and to show my *sœur* to Eriko-sama before I showed her to anyone else."

"And then?"

Rei-sama added.

“Eriko-sama had said that she would come to see the kendo match, so... I...”

That had been a summary, but with the small nuances that Yoshino gave, the truth was more than what Yoshino let on. It felt like some grand tale. Yumi-san understood the truth of the tale without any imagined dramatizations, and made different faces because of it, but Yoshino did not care.

Yoshino closed her eyes in a way that seemed to read “This experience had been deep in my heart, but it seems I finally let it out.”

“If I think about it, when Eriko-sama had come to give me some pastries, her face had seemed a bit tired. She had also told me ‘Thank Yoshino well for me’. It was because she was thinking of the task she had given to Yoshino. But I, of course, hadn’t paid it any thought.”

Wrong. That was completely wrong. It was a piercing thought inside Yoshino that Rei-chan was wrong. Eriko-sama had simply come to put pressure upon Yoshino. But pure (simple) Rei-chan had believed that it was a simple conversation.

“If that’s the case, then I see why you have to hurry. Alright, next Saturday. The Yamayurikai will host the event, and we’ll get permission from the school.”

Rei-chan neatly and quickly resolved.

So Sachiko-sama had watched the whole incident transpire from beginning to end, and as she watched the Yellow Rose battle come to an end, she laughed.

“Yoshino-chan, Yumi. There are several sheets of the poster paper we used during the School Festival, so you can use those.”

Without hearing Yumi-san’s opinion, she had been given parts of the work.

Part 2.

“I’ve heard that there is some audition thing going on?”

It was passing period between periods two and three. Mami Yamaguchi, who had gone to the bathroom or some place, returned to the classroom, approached Yumi’s desk sneakily, and whispered.

“Where in the world did you...”

Yoshino had declared that she would hold an audition yesterday, after school. Not even a day had passed before the news had gotten out.

Wondering whether Yoshino-san was the one who spread the rumor, Yumi turned to look at her seat. Yoshino-san, however, was immersed in her English-Japanese dictionary, furiously looking for the word ‘leader’, and she did not turn her attention towards Yumi.

“It wasn’t Yoshino-san. I heard it from Rosa Chinesis. She told me to make a huge advertisement in the Lilian Kwaraban. I also got permission from her to pattern the newspaper after the audition article.”

“...”

Sachiko-sama was an incredibly fast worker. Before her petite sœur could find a good excuse to evade the audition with, she had already made moves to dig a moat around Yumi.

“But what a relief! This year there was no questionnaire made for the Mister Lillian contest, so after the school festival, this was the one period of the year lacking an event. With this, we can keep the pace up.”

“If something like last year ever happened again, it was decided that it was better for the event to simply not take place. The members from last year aren’t here though, so things are a bit more boring.”

In other words, it’s not that the faith in the vote was lost, but that it was obvious that most people would pick a member of the Rose family. However, even without collecting the questionnaires, it was even more obvious that there would be no deliberation on picking Rei-sama again as this year’s Mister Lillian.

“But I’ve thought about this audition. It really is like a ferry across bad waters. The Newspaper Club will cooperate with the Yamayurikai to the greatest extent possible. Today after school, the Newspaper Club was supposed to meet at the Rose Mansion... Huh?”

Mami-san abruptly stopped talking. She had probably noticed Yumi-san’s demeanor.

“You don’t want to do this?”

“Yoshino-san is the one who wants to do this.”

“Mmmf.”

Mami-san took one look at Yoshino-san and replied back to Yumi.

“Can I hear the reason why Yumi-san does not want to participate?”

“Why?”

Yumi bowed her head onto the desk and let out a sigh.

Mami-san squatted next to the desk, and brought her face close to Yumi.

“Wouldn’t you try to explain it for me? I’m not Sachiko-sama after all.”

“I see. Of course.”

After the two shared a laugh together, Mami-san began talking again.

“Well now. Do you oppose the concept of an audition? Or do you not want to choose your sœur in an audition?”

“I don’t really know.”

It wasn’t as much the fact that she had been forced by her Onee-sama as much as that she simply was opposed to the audition.

“Let’s try to analyze the situation. If you don’t, then you can’t form an effective counter strategy.”

“What counter strategy? A way to escape from the audition?”

“To accept the audition, but to simply work against it. Even though the Newspaper Club is ecstatic that two boutons are holding an audition at the same time, as a friend, I don’t want to see you forced into doing anything you don’t want to.”

The bell for third period rang, and Mami-san uttered “There’ll be a one page special in the paper” as she found her way back to her seat.

“Analyze, huh.”

If she thought about why she hated it so much, it seemed as if her best option was to write a one page paper on it. As she was thinking, the teacher who needed to know the word for ‘leader’ came in. A look at Yoshino-san made Yumi see that Yoshino-san had quickly found her word. Yoshino-san closed the dictionary, and put her self into a somewhat aggressive position.

Question: Do you agree with an audition? (Yes | No | I don’t understand the question) Answer: “I don’t understand the question” gives you zero points.

During third and fourth period, Yumi listened to only half of the lecture, and tried to used the remaining half of her brain, but could not.

As she walked towards the Rose Mansion with her lunch, she could do nothing but sigh. Today, everyone was talking about the sœur auditions. It’s not as if she was invited to the Rose Mansion, or that there was much work for the Student Council to finish. On the way, Yumi had seriously thought about just spending today in her classroom, eating lunch, but she did not make any U-Turns as she walked up to the Rose Mansion.

Yumi let out a yell of confidence, and opened the entrance to the Rosa Mansion. In front of her she could see the figure of a person hurriedly climbing up the stairs.

“Shimako-san.”

“Uaa. You surprised me, Yumi-san.”

The stairs were supposed to have been quiet during their ascent, but they had suddenly creaked, so they had surprised Shimako-san. Shimako-san gripped the handrail and turned backwards as her heart seemed to beat outward.

“What do you think, Shimako-san?”

Of course Shimako-san wasn't a superperson, nor was she even in the same class as Yumi, so perhaps she wouldn't even be thinking about the same things as the people in her class. That's why Shimako's response “About what?” was quite appropriate.

“About the audition. You didn't say whether you were opposed to it or whether you liked the idea, yesterday.”

“Aaah...”

Shimako-san whispered and once again began walking up the stairs.

“I'm not really in a position where I can oppose or approve of the situation.”

Picking the *sœur* was the job of the older sister, was Shimako-san's idea of it. Yumi once again followed Shimako-san up.

“That's true. But my *sœur* will have to become a very good friend of Shimako-san's. Are you opposed to finding that sort of a friend at an audition?”

“That's true.”

Shimako-san laughed as she crossed the last step on the stairs.

“Of course, if I say that I have no reservations about the idea, then I would be completely lying. But if the auditions do work out, then maybe there's a value in trying them out.”

“Trying them out?”

Yumi-san asked, to which Shimako-san replied “Of course, I'm speaking assuming that I'm in your position.”

“If I didn't have a *sœur* right? Then, then I would work together with Yoshino-san to look over some applicants.”

Of course, Shimako-san had recently found her cute, boisterous *sœur* Noriko-chan, so she was using words like ‘If I’ or ‘then I’, which meant the conversation was meaningless for Shimako-san, in spite of which Yumi still wanted to listen to Shimako-san's thoughts. She wanted to sample and gather the thoughts of several people about the audition idea.

“But why wouldn’t you completely oppose it?”

Shimako-san replied as she was turning the knob on the biscuit-like door.

“Because maybe, in that list of candidates, Noriko would be there.”

When the door opened, a first year could be seen from across the room. In spite of it being autumn, this first year smiled in a way reminiscent of a spring breeze.

“Gokigenyou.”

It was Noriko-chan.

“Oh, I see.” Yumi-chan finally understood Shimako-san a bit. Shimako-san was sure that, even if she would not have met Noriko-chan during the spring, that she would find her some other time. It didn’t matter how the next meeting would happen.

“It’s better to start somewhere than nowhere at all? Is that it?”

“I wholeheartedly think so.”

Shimako-san wholeheartedly wanted Noriko-chan by her side, so the method to acquire Noriko-chan was of no consequence.

Noriko-chan sat down and said “I’ve prepared green tea.”. The steaming teacup was placed right in front of Yumi.

“How about you, Noriko-chan?”

“Huh?”

“How would you react to becoming Shimako-san’s sœur in an audition?”

Noriko-chan mulled over her answer and tried to figure out a way to answer the point that Yumi was driving at, but instead, cleverly threw a question back at Yumi.

“Yumi-sama, you wouldn’t dislike having a petite sœur, would you?”

“Maybe.”

Since Yumi became Sachiko-sama’s petite sœur, she herself knew vaguely that she would have to have her own. The reason she still did not have a sœur by the second term was not because she was harshly rejected, but that she had simply missed out on chances to look for sœurs.

“So then, are you simply against the concept of the audition itself?”

“That may be the case. But if you look at it from the outside, it’s just another way of finding a sœur.”

“Then do you oppose it because it’s Yoshino-san’s plan?”

“Well if I had to plan it, we’d be thinking about some different plan.”

“It probably would. I wonder why.”

Noriko-chan and Yumi began to think deeply about the issue. Shimako-san, who had been silently listening, opened her mouth and began talking “Perhaps, Yumi-san”

“Perhaps, Yumi-san is opposed to the part about judging people.”

“That’s it.”

Yumi said nothing, but wagged her finger in a way to show assent.

“How many worthy first-years there are who want to be Yumi-san’s sœurs I do not know, but choosing just one person against the rest is a bit cruel. What’s the qualification to choose against? Just what does the chosen sœur have that the others don’t? A weird comparison would be a tournament. Amongst the competitors, what is my rank? Who is in the panel of judges? What kind of a person gets a better score than another? That’s what Yumi-san is thinking, right?”

Right as Shimako-san finished her sentence.

“There is no ‘kind of person’ here.”

The door opened with a thud, and in the doorway stood Yoshino-san.

Part 3.

“Please, tell me!”

Yoshino-san angrily strode into the room.

“Kind of Person’? We are the future Onee-samas! Better score? Isn’t that what we’re looking for? What’s wrong with a better score?”

That’s true. If a person did not have that sort of courage inside them, they could not find a petite sœur. In an audition, the decision will have to narrow down one out of two final applicants. One should know their tastes if they plan to pick a petite sœur. If there is serious worrying that a person may not be able to pick her petite sœur, then she shouldn’t be calling for people to audition for her.

If one thought about it deep enough, when a girl decides to accept the invitation to audition, it means the same thing as the petite sœurs having chosen their grande sœurs. As the grande sœur chooses the petite sœur, so does the petite sœur choose the grande sœur.

“What’s wrong with you?! We’re in the same class, but you still won’t wait for me?!”

Yoshino slammed her lunch on the table and glared at Yumi-san. After fourth period ended, Yoshino-san went to the bathroom and came back and saw no sign of Yumi-san. She had to ask around, and a classmate finally told Yoshino that Yumi-san had taken her lunch and headed to the Rose Mansion.

“Huh? Didn’t you tell me that you had a Kendo Club meeting today at lunch?”

“The meeting is for the regular fighters only. I told you about the meeting because Rei-chan would not be able to come to the Rose Mansion today because of it.”

“Oh, is that why...”

“Hey, pay more attention to things outside of yourself, will you?!”

Unfortunately, not every Kendo Club member was supposed to participate in the Interschool Kendo tournaments. For that matter, only five people were allowed to go to the tournaments, and they would probably be the only ones coming to the meeting, to decide how to manage the team. Yoshino, in spite of being a second year, was just a beginner. Yoshino, the latest addition to the club, would have no chance of being nominated to represent the school. If you combine her genes and her upbringing, then she should have become a regular shortly after joining the club, but reality isn't often as nice as theory makes people think.

"So, what's wrong? You really hate the auditions, don't you Yumi-san?"

"Well, hating maybe too strong ..."

"What is with that look on your face! If you don't like something, just say that you don't like it! I want to have your input in the way the auditions are going to be run!"

Yoshino-san began half-heartedly putting some pressure on Yumi-san to speak her mind. Yumi-san put up a face that said "I wonder what I should tell her", when all of a sudden, Yumi's savior came from behind.

"I understand why Yumi keeps worrying about the auditions. I also don't like having to judge people like that in contests."

Shimako-san was the one who came to Yumi-san's defense.

"So? What does that mean?"

Yoshino folded her arms onto her chest and raised an eyebrow.

"Even though we're both students, how would you feel if someone else judged me over you?"

"Well, Shimako-san, earlier when we were deciding whether we should hold an audition or not, you had said that you weren't opposed to the idea did you not?"

As Shimako-san nodded her assent, Yumi-san confirmed that something had happened between Shimako-san and Yoshino. Although about what, Yumi-san did not know.

“Let me ask you something else then, Shimako-san! When people are elected to run for the student council, isn’t **that** an issue of students picking students?!”

“The elections are different. It’s when every student in the school votes for a voice who will represent them in student affairs.”

When Shimako-san became forward about her opinion, it would occasionally bother Yoshino. It wasn’t enough that she disagreed. She would do the things that Yoshino herself could not do easily, which would make Yoshino admiring and jealous. But admiring was the opposite of what she needed to be now.

“Okay then. If everyone in the school were to vote for who a person’s *sœur* should be, would you agree then, Shimako-san?”

“Everyone? Picking *sœurs*?”

Shimako-san tilted her head. Yoshino knew that what she had said was simply a theoretical retort, but she hoped that her retort would have some effect.

“But, Yoshino-sama.”

This time it was Noriko-chan who spoke from behind.

“Could a person accept a *sœur* who had been picked by majority rule?”

“Of course, not.”

And now even your *sœur* gets into this, Yoshino resigned. Noriko couldn’t have been this much like a pre-prepared package for Shimako-san.

“Then it’s useless to continue any further with this line of thinking.”

“Geh”

Yoshino groaned as she opened her lunch box. Noriko-chan seemed as if she had been seduced by Shimako-san. But she knew she had to stop this here.

Eventually, the three others also began opening their lunch boxes. It seemed that they had gotten so entranced in the debate, that they had forgotten about their lunches.

“Sachiko-sama isn’t here.”

Shimako-san whispered.

“That’s right, huh.”

Yumi-san took her chopsticks out from her chopsticks box, and inclined her head. Yoshino hadn’t heard anything from Onee-sama about this.

The Inter-High School Kendo Tournament obviously shouldn’t have any effect on Sachiko-sama’s plans. Then maybe Sachiko-sama had not arrived for different reasons. Obviously if you had no specific invitation to come, you didn’t have to, but in the days before the School Festival, she had come to the busy lunch meetings and paid attention to every detail, and ever since then, her regular attendance had become customary.

“Can I ask you something?”

Yoshino asked, as she put down her chopsticks.

“All three of you oppose the audition happening at school, right?”

She had thought about the issue again from bottom to top. Yumi-san gave her response.

“Well, isn’t it like picking the lead actress of the school play?”

Yumi looked quickly around and saw Shimako-san and Noriko-chan nod deeply. Yoshino steeled herself and asked again.

“Well, you’re doing something personal in a public place, so.”

“Umm.”

Yumi-san made several, complicated faces. For some reason it resembled the look she got on her face when she faced the blackboard in math class and had to answer a question. But honest Yumi-san finally came out with an answer.

“If you’re talking about a person’s feelings, well each person has their own internal sense of what’s too little and what’s too much. For example, if you do this much, then it’s okay. If you do more, then it’s not okay. Something like that. But people don’t think about this individually, and instead give vague reactions like ‘I don’t really like it’ or ‘I don’t know why, but I’m okay with it’, and other people live with these vague responses.”

“Yeah.”

“That’s why it’s hard too understand this public/private thing.”

Of course. Yumi put her explanation in terms of human perception.

“So you’re asking me to hold a tea party at my house, and to invite potential *sœur* candidates there?”

When Yumi-san thought about Yoshino-san’s proposal, she realized that she was fairly comfortable with doing the audition publicly.

“If you do a Rokomi, then okay. I understand.”

“Yoshino-san, you can’t mean.”

“No, I won’t have an audition at my house.”

Yoshino laughed drily.

Yoshino had only asked the question in order to understand what the others in the room were thinking.

Yoshino was being more self-conscious than usual. Maybe because Yoshino is used to being the center of attention with relatives and friends, she had not noticed this slip of hers. Of course, there were different degrees of her selfishness. She didn’t treat Yumi-san and other close friends like everyone else. But for people like her who loved themselves, it isn’t a bad thing to put yourself before others. But this was embarrassing, so she did not want to tell others.

But from the beginning, Yoshino-san had something else to say that she hadn’t.

“But you know, I never really thought of the audition as a competition. If everyone thinks of it like that, then obviously they’d have reservations about the audition. There’s no reason to treat the audition as if it were some tournament that you have to win in.”

Yumi, Shimako, and Noriko immediately turned towards Yoshino as if bewitched.

“What?!”

Yumi-san asked Yoshino dryly.

“It’s just that, the moment you came into the room, it seemed as if some lever had been pulled, and that you were irritated from the start.”

“It’s because I have unwavering confidence in myself. So I’ll fight whenever I’m challenged. But if I have no strong personal opinion on the subject, I’ll also listen to what others have to say about it.”

And then.

“Fine then! I’ll decide, right here, right now!”

Yumi stood up in a sudden revelation. Not only did she stand, but she balled her hand into a fist, and thumped it onto her chest.

“If there’s no other way for me to find a sœur, let’s have this audition right now! Let’s do it! And I’ll probably understand how the audition works after I start doing it!”

Why, that Yumi-san! Her sudden declaration was so uplifting, that Yoshino could do nothing but clap.

Shimako-san grinned.

“After school today, let’s hold some real talks about this, okay? We won’t just discuss the big picture, but also the little things that we forgot to talk about, the things we need to do first, and other stuff like that!”

“Will you help us too?”

Yumi-san asked Shimako-san happily.

“Of course. Won’t we, Noriko?”

Noriko-san's Onee-sama had agreed, so Noriko-san went quiet for a second, and then said "Yeah." But Noriko-san hesitated.

"Yumi-san, um, are you sure I should help out?"

"Huh? Of course! If Noriko-chan helped out, we would be that much stronger!"

After seeing the smile that lit up Yumi-san's face, Noriko-chan could only say "I'll help then. To all the best.". Perhaps Noriko-chan had wanted to say something else.

Or so Yoshino-san thought absent-mindedly. Or maybe it had been her imagination. But if it wasn't her imagination, then Noriko-chan had chosen not to say something, and it made Yoshino-san wonder what Noriko-chan had left unsaid.

Sachiko-sama did not come at all that day to the Rose Mansion.

Part 4.

Why had Noriko thought something like that.

She was revisiting the moment when Noriko had told Yumi “Are you sure I should help out?”

Yumi-sama didn’t understand what Noriko had been asking, and then Noriko had let it drop.

“Aaaah.”

Afternoon classes were filled with such sighs.

I see.

She didn’t want to overstep her bounds. If she said what she wanted to say, then she would have to take responsibility for her statements until the very end.

Because she had only done her duty halfway, because she dropped the torch before it was all done, she felt bad about it. So she kept brooding about it.

She had to help out now, so there was no point in thinking more about it, Noriko thought as she loosened her grip on the broom handle. She did not feel like listening to Yumi-san’s request, however Shimako-san and Yoshino-san made Noriko think twice.

“What’s wrong, Noriko-san?”

“Ahhh.”

Tōko brought her face close enough to Noriko to kiss her, as Noriko daydreamed. Suddenly seeing Tōko’s face made Noriko jump back.

“Well, I’m sorry. You had been brushing the same place with the broom for a while now, so I took that as a sign that something was going wrong.”

“...I’m sorry. I was just thinking about something.”

“I see.”

Tōko said nothing more as she took out her dustpan and put in the dust that Noriko had collected earlier and put it into the trash.

“Tōko.”

“Hm?”

Her two banana curls of hair bobbed up and down as she looked up.

“What do you think of Yumi-san?”

“Hmmm.”

“Her face is never still, her mood is always plain. But her heart is with the people, so her head’s just a scatterbrain.”

Each of her lines began with an ‘H’ sound, and ended with a rhyme. Only the third rhyme was off.

“She is, but she’s still pretty popular with the first years.”

“It seems so.”

Noriko smiled.

Unlike Yumi-sama, Tōko would purposefully misunderstand her questions, and would throw your questions back at you. She understood what Noriko had wanted to say, but she probably was dodging because she did not want to answer.

But ever since she had learned that lesson, she had learned to not give up asking questions that she wanted answered.

“Did you think that I had wanted to be Yumi-sama’s petite sœur?”

Tōko said, as she revealed an anger in her face that Noriko had not seen before.

“That’s why I was asking. Did I do anything wrong?”

Noriko winced from Tōko’s anger. But Tōko herself did not seem to notice it. It was just that, a hidden part of Tōko’s soul had just been opened up, which is why she reacted so violently to Noriko’s innocent question.

As the two eyed each other, their classmates began to bunch up around them. Students who had stayed after school, students who had clubs to attend, and even conspicuously tall girls. They would stop, say a polite “Gokigenyou”, look down at their watch, flutter their hair around, and then run off into the hallways.

“I want to help you out, Tōko.”



Noriko said honestly to Tōko. When Noriko had asked Yumi-sama “Are you sure I should help out?”, neither Kanako-san nor anyone else had come to mind and caused her hesitation. Tōko was the one.

Maybe Noriko should have asked “Are you sure I should help out?” to Tōko instead of Yumi-sama. She would have told Tōko about the opportunity to audition sœurs and asked “Do you want to join in?”

“I need no strength from you, Noriko-san.”

As Noriko watched Tōko coldly turn and leave the room, she found herself somehow understanding Tōko’s reaction.

“...Tōko.”

Noriko did not say anything else aloud, but the thought echoed in her mind.

Part 5.

“So?”

Sachiko-sama asked. She was wondering if Yumi had anything to say.

“The name ‘audition’ can make people think of weird things, so I wanted to clear it up.”

Yumi said clearly.

It was after school, at the Rose Mansion. Two members of each rose family were present, totaling six members, with the addition of the Newspaper Club representative Yamaguchi Mami. Even Rei-sama who had Kendo practice every day, took a break from her preparation and decided to attend the special meeting. When anything dealt with the issue of a sœur for Rei’s cute sœur Yoshino-san, Rei would always say “Leave it to me, I’ll make sure it works out”.

“If not audition, then what would be a better name?”

“Perhaps a Tea Party, or a Social Meet?”

The scritch scratch of a quickly moving pen could be heard. It was the sound of Mami-san, taking down memos.

“You’ll only be changing the name?”

This time Yoshino-san answered the question.

“We aren’t aiming to just pick a sœur. We want to gather as many potential sœur candidates as possible, and hold a meeting with them.”

This was the line that the four of them had decided on during an informal conversation during lunch.

Rather than presuming more than they should and saying “We will do it this way”, they decided to that it would be better to act as if they were offering their opinion and say “We want to do it this way”.

“Basically”

Rei-sama said.

“It’s like a group **Miai** then?”

“What an old fashioned idea. Isn’t it more like a large group party?”

Sachiko-sama said in correction.

“Well, at first glance, maybe.”

However you looked at it, it was still a strange idea.

“So? How will you pick people out of the attendees at the tea party?”

“We’ll announce our picks in the Lillian Kwaraban.”

Mami-san immediately interrupted Yumi. “Understood.” she said, as she nodded.

“We will mix a set of first- and second-years. The first set of participants will be picked at random from a list. These participants will each be examined, and the unfit ones will be winnowed out. We believe that about twenty shall be able to make it to the final round.”

Shimako-san continued off from Yumi’s initial explanation.

“There will be a few rules for the participants. The first-years must have no *sœurs*. The second-years may have *grande sœurs*, but may not have *petite sœurs*.”

“This too is a way to winnow out applicants.”

“Fine. But after that, when you call the finalists to drink tea and talk, how will you decide then?”

Sachiko-sama pinned Yumi down with her eyes and asked.

“That’s it.”

“That’s it?”

The words ‘Do you really think this is an audition?’ were written all over Sachiko-sama’s resigned face.

“The Tea Party is a place of meetings. What’s left to do is for each participant to decide.”

“So there’s no ‘Please become my *petite sœur*?’ or ‘Sorry, I cannot approve of you?’”

How did Sachiko-sama figure that out. It was obvious that Sachiko-sama had wanted this to be an event where people would be sworn into couples.

“No, there is none of that.”

“So then, you’re telling me you can pick a *sœur* like that?”

“If there’s someone there who I find agreeable, then I plan to ask them to become my *sœur*. If I find several candidates, but cannot choose one, then I will ask them to come help out at the Rose Mansion.

“To go through a trial run with them?”

Shimako-san had had this ‘trial run’ with Noriko-chan. The ‘trial run’ wasn’t to test whether the candidate was incapable or not, but to test whether a petite *sœur* had a long-term affinity for her grande *sœur*. There was also the unwritten rule that if someone really could not find a *sœur*, then she would take the most useful volunteer in the Rose Mansion.

“I think I understand what you’re trying to achieve.”

Sachiko-said, as she slowly raised herself out of her chair.

“Well, if this is what all of you have decided, then I’ll leave it up to you then.”

Sachiko-sama wasn’t just ending the conversation short but gathering her school bag, her coat, and her things, and getting ready to leave.

“W... W... Wait, Onee-sama”

Yumi quickly followed behind.

“If it’s just a Tea Party, a group *miai* as you say, then there’s no point in me further planning thing. There’s nothing left for me to do.”

“But, we wanted you to come to the Tea Party...”

Sachiko-sama let out a dejected sigh.

“Yumi. A third-year like me who already has a *sœur* isn’t allowed by the attendance rules. If you want to do something to please me, then please invite as many first years as you can.”

Yumi knew that Sachiko-sama’s argument was a logical one, but even then, she could not get herself to say “I see your point” or “You’re right. We’ll do just that”.

Not having her Onee-sama around when doing something as huge as picking out a *sœur*? She had told her Onee-sama about this and that for so long during lunch, that she did not expect even a hint of this.

“Sachiko.”

Behind Yumi, Rei-sama followed. Sachiko-sama’s eyes narrowed.

“Rei. I do not wish to play cop with you too. If you want to play along with them, then you’re free to do so.”

“...”

Rei-sama stared at Sachiko-sama’s face for a few moments and then curtly nodded.

“I see. I too will step back from this then. My kendo meet is very soon, after all.”

Yoshino-san said nothing as she stood up from her chair. But Rei-sama simply turned her gaze away dryly without saying anything.

“The two of us will help out when we can. Behind the scenes, of course.”

As Sachiko-sama and Rei-san were exchanging glances and heading out of the room, Shimako-san interjected.

Even though Shimako-san was a second-year, she was a *grande sœur* with her *petite sœur* first-year Noriko-chan, so she was the same as Sachiko-sam and Rei-sama. A person who, by the rules, was not allowed to attend.

“Thank you. Your assistance is much appreciated.”

The words hung in the air as the two third-years disappeared through the door.

“What’s with those two.”

Yoshino-san indignantly burst out, as the creak of the stairs was heard with the leaving of the third-years. Were they purposefully doing this?

Noriko whispered timidly.

“Rosa Chinensis called us together her herself, but got mad at us?”

“No, that’s not it Noriko.”

Shimako-san corrected her, to which Yumi nodded in agreement.

“No, Onee-sama is not mad.”

She had radiated coolness from the outside, but Yumi knew her Onee-sama was probably laughing on the inside.

She was sure of it.

Why Onee-sama chose to talk and act like she did, though, Yumi still did not understand.

It seemed as soon as the two left from the Rose Mansion, the atmosphere became a little cooler.

Maria-sama's Planet

Part 1.

“We will begin accepting applications to participate in the Sœur Tea Party! The rules permit --”

The words came from all around.

“The Sœur Tea Party is an experiment to create a special social setting. Your involvement in the tea party does not constitute a firm decision to obtain a sœur.”

From the morning it had started, and had continued on now into lunch. Everyone was talking about the news that the Lillian Kawaraban had announced. It was not exaggerating to say that the rumors of this Sœur Tea Party circulated as rapidly as a flower bloomed.

“In addition, Rosa Foetida en Bouton and Rosa Chinensis en Bouton are scheduled to attend.’ Wow!”

Noriko wondered how many “Wow’s” she had now heard throughout the day, as she dropped her gaze onto her paperback book.

If it’s this loud, then how can the other book readers meet. Since Noriko had been at the school for over half a year, she had gotten used to the low hush of gossip at an all girls’ school. But today was different. Because this time, the gossip dealt with her, so she could not help but react to the gossip she heard. She couldn’t just dismiss it with a “Ah, Kojima’s gossipping again” today.

“Hey hey, Noriko-san. We wanted to ask you about the Sœur Tea Party.”

Again, classmates came to Noriko-san who believed that she would have top quality news.

“Ah, well.”

She didn’t want to ignore them, so instead she tried to act friendly.

“I don’t know anything more than what’s written in the paper about it, except that the en Boutons want anyone who meets the regulations and who is interested to apply as quickly as possible.”

Noriko raised her head out of her paperback and gave her best business smile.

“Well, we want to, but.”

“The regulations...”

The girls turned towards each other with sad faces. Of course, those two must be Atsuko-san and Miyuki-san. They were zealous participants in Bible Studies Club. But each of them had accepted a rosary from their sempai in the club, so they could not go to the Sœur Tea Party.

Noriko decided she would spend no more time talking about the matter and returned to her reading, but the two girls did not leave from the side of her desk.

When Noriko was about to say something back to them, Atsuko-san asked.

“By the way, Noriko-san.”

“Yes?”

“Is Tōko-san invited?”

“Tōko?”

When discussing the Sœur Tea Party, she had prepared answers to questions regarding certain topics. So she had prepared a set of questions beforehand, and formulated answers for them. But she had not prepared for any questions dealing with the “Tōko” topic. Why were these two sœurs of second-years the first to ask a question dealing with a proper noun, Noriko wondered, as she inclined her head, and pointed to the print that Miyuki-san held in her hand.

“You’ve read the Lillian Kwaraban right? So you know it said that the applicants are picked at random, right?”

“But, well.”

First of all, whether Tōko will apply or not, I don’t know. If you want to know about someone, why don’t you ask her yourself?”

After Noriko finished speaking, she realized “Well now, Tōko isn’t with those two”. As soon as school had started “I’m Tōko”, “I’m Atsuko”, “I’m Miyuki”, they had said to each other, as if they were idols introducing themselves to each other, and somewhere along the line they had become a group.

“Tōko-san... She wouldn’t apply... Would she?”

“Eh?”

Wondering what they were talking about, Noriko furrowed her eyebrows, and then dropped the matter, and let Atsuko-san and Miyuki-san go back to their conversation.

“Ah, but, if Yumi-sama comes to the Sœur Tea Party, then she really doesn’t have any preferences, does she.”

“Maybe the Party is just camouflage.”

“But then who? Kanako-san?”

“That’s exactly who. I wonder how it’ll go.”

So then, Kanako-san was very high on the list of potential sœur candidates, but right now, the person closest to becoming Yumi-sama’s sœur was Tōko. Whenever people were found talking about the Tea Party, they would keep whispering about a rumor that Yumi-sama would give someone special treatment (in other words: show attraction), as if it were true.

“Well then, good luck to Tōko-san.”

“Hadn’t she said ‘I want to become a Rose some day’ in middle school?”

And then all of a sudden, they fell silent. Perhaps they wondered what would happen if Noriko would become angry. Noriko wondered would happen if she lost her cool. She took a deep breath, and spoke again.

“Well, that’s not really true --”

“But but that’s something Noriko-san doesn’t know about, right?”

“Eh?”

“Well, you said you don’t know any more about this than what’s written about it in the paper, right?”

Yes, that was what she had said.

In all innocence, in all straightforwardness, in all frankness, the Angels were interfering too much today, thought Noriko.

Part 2.

“Well? How many people are here?”

Yoshino-san asked, as she began drafting the plans.

“Starting at lunch today there were seven first-years and five-second years.”

Mami-san was the one who answered, who did not care whether she had to stay in the Rosa Mansion through lunch or after school. For her, it was a transfer while spiritedly toiling at her life’s work, the “Lillian Kwaraban”. The Newspaper Club kouhai would come and go too, so the work was coming along, but for some reason, it seemed as if the place had become “Newspaper Club -- Rose Mansion Branch”.

Now that the Newspaper Club personnel would come more, the third-years would come less.

“We had said that we’d let you guys handle it, so this is what happens. It’s not as if we’re avoiding the Rose Mansion or something. If something needs to be done, we come, and sometimes we amble over to the Rose Mansion and just eat our lunches. It’s just that all the recent talk has been about the Tea Party, and we don’t want to get into that.”

When the Roses put all of their reasons together, it was as if they were treating their Boutons as adults.

“I understand. It’s just that, you’re coming less than we thought you would.”

At first Mami-san had put out the application in the Lillian Kwaraban, but now she even began collecting the applications.

“But there’s twelve people here.”

Even Yumi took a break from planning the layout of the invitation and looked up. Of course, there weren’t any more people involved past those who were predicted to come from the beginning.

The day when they had decided to change it from an audition to a Tea Party, and when they decided to announce it in an Extra in the Lillian Kwaraban had been Wednesday. From that day after school they had begun receive applications, and up 'til today the first day of the month, a little more than four days had passed. If you exclude the Sundays that they had off from school, then it would be only three days.

“I don't think any of them really understand what the rules are though...”

Mami-san said, as she looked through the application posted in the Lillian Kwaraban.

“I think it would be best if we put big letters in the paper that simply say ‘Submit Your Applications at the First Floor of the Rose Mansion’. That way overenthusiastic people, and people who simply misunderstood the rules would have no problems.”

Noriko-chan said. There were no mistakes in the Lillian Kwaraban, after all.

For that matter, the restrictions were a bit harsh. Among the applicants who did not have petite (or grande) sœurs, nobody knew how many would actually be interviewed. Even amongst them, the amount that was thought of as willing to cooperate in the Tea Party was not really that large.

“Girls who double over in fright when they enter the Rose Mansion shall not become our sœurs!”

“Yoshino-san...”

Yumi's face wasn't the only one that said that she was wrong. Mami-san, Shimako-san, and Noriko-chan's glances added to the accusation.

“What?”

“This is about picking our sœurs, but, for now, come on.”

“I see. So it's just going to be a gathering of regular people, huh. But I'll bet there will be some strong candidates in the mix.”

Yoshino-san understood, as she took a seat. Right now the car was at Park, but at any time later you could restart the engine into full.

“This way, the applicants will take care of themselves.”

If one were to suddenly go up the stairs, they would see the chaos. From the Rose Mansion’s first floor desk, the path would lead to the filled out application forms and a ballpoint pen. Also, there was a 30 x 4 cm. box created to deposit and withdraw letters. During lunch and after school, letters would be place in the box, and beside the box there was a gathering of other materials. Right now it was the Newspaper Club first years who were in charge.

“About twelve applicants huh. It seems there was no reason to make the box as big as it is.”

“That’s because the number of applicants has been constantly decreasing.”

Noriko-chan had said that neither the amount of applications they had prepared from the start, nor the amount of applications they will have received by lunch today would equal the number of actual applicants. But that wasn’t neccessarily what would happen, and it was a bit wrong.

“There are some who filled out the form incorrectly, and had to have their forms voided. There must be some people who came once, but returned because they were unsure of whether to apply or not, right.”

“I don’t think there are any more than forty people who either made mistakes on their forms or an unsure of whether to enter or not.”

Said Mami-san tiredly, in her retort to Noriko’s crisp question. Then, as if remembering something, she searched around in a paper bag and fished out a tea bag.

“There must be some returned applications too. But since those aren’t related to the regular applications, we don’t really count them.”

“Huh?”

Both of them rose at the same time.

“You know, requests and encouragement? Those sorts of letters.”

Mami-san said, as she raised one piece of paper in the air and read from it.

“Yumi-sama. Good luck, and pick a fantastic sœur!”

“Oh my.”

“Yoshino-sama and Yumi-sama should know what their prospects for finding sœurs are, shouldn’t they?”

“What?!”

“We just wanted to ask. Could two regular second-years help out? We could invite a lot of first years”

“ ... ”

Everyone’s general requests were being mixed in with the Bouton Sœur Picking applications. If these sort of requests kept coming in, there would be no meaning in having a Tea Party any more.

“There are more, but they are all mostly the same thing, so I’ll save you from having to hear more. There are about twenty in total. But maybe there is some value in looking over them, so you can skim them later.”

But the problem was that there were more messages from people who were not applicants than from those who were actually applicants. Then there was no use for moving the submissions box to the second floor of the Rose Mansion. It wasn’t as if she were feeling cool towards them, it’s just that she wished that people who were not applicants would not spend the time to go up the stairs and deposit their message.

“But, you know.”

Yumi said.

“There’s no real harm this time. The ones who are applying would apply anyway, so whether the others go into the trash or are submitted here shouldn’t have any effect, right?”

“This isn’t a trash for everyone to put things into. This is for participants.”

But they couldn’t change things around because there were too few applicants. There were only two more days until the End of Registration date. How could they change the date so close to the end?

“Something relating to the applicants must be failing to excite them. So we need to reflect on the applications, and the Tea Party itself. There is also some interesting things happening outside of the Rose Mansion.”

Mami-san said.

“Interesting things?”

“Right now in the year, the number of Sœur relationships being sworn is increasing.”

“Really?”

This is the sort of rumor that distant Yumi would obviously have heard for the first time, but even Yoshino-san and Shimako-san did not seem to have heard it. Noriko-chan was a Lillian first-year, so she obviously did not know what was usual for a year. Maybe Tsutako-san was the one who noticed it. She received requests for pictures, so she would probably know about the situation well.

“During First Term, around May, when new members join the club as beginners, a large mass enters and they become sœurs. The spit really flies.”

Mami-san continued with her lecture.

“The next is the School Festival. After that there’s Christmas, Valentine’s Day, and those sorts of events, so it’s easy to get together. The next big one is the School Closing Ceremony. Even if they rejected requests before, people will go on vacation from the next day, so they make different decisions.”

Of course, of course, the heads nodded.

“So right now, as far as Sœur pairings go, there’s a relative lull. Last year, because of someone, there were several breakups and rejoinings, but that’s rare in most other years.”

When she said “Someone”, all gazes turned towards a person, the very person responsible. The one responsible for the Yellow Rose Revolution, Yoshino-san, looked back with a face that said “There’s something wrong all of a sudden?”

“How did Mami-san come to this conclusion?”

“Maybe if you call it a last minute buyout it works. Do you have some first-year you like? Well, she obviously doesn’t have an Onee-sama right. You like her, but you don’t do anything definitive, so you just stay friends. But then, this year there’s the Tea Party.”

“Hm?”

“Maybe someone wanted to participate in the Tea Party. She probably thinks about ‘Should I or shouldn’t I apply’. And then, she suddenly thinks ‘But if someone else gets the Rosary, that would be very unfair.’”

“Oh -- of course.”

“If a second-year says ‘Don’t go to the Tea Party, but become my sœur instead’, then a first-year will think about it -- and that’s how the sœur relationship is made, and with someone who she knows. This doesn’t happen to everyone, but this must happen to some.”

Rather than creating participants, the Tea Party can act as cupid, and make sœur couples. But, even indirectly, if the goal that two girls who wanted to become sœurs but could not find their partner would find a meeting place, then that made Yumi happy.

“At this rate, we’ll have to invite all of the applicants to the Tea Party itself. Well, the number of applicants will probably increase by the final day. But there’s been a stampede of sœurs.”

Mami-san laughed coldly as she finished her analysis.

“Well, it’s four ‘o clock, so we are finished accepting applications for today.” said the Newspaper Club first-years, as they poked their faces into the shadows of the biscuit-shaped door.

“Ah, thank you for the effort. It’s been cold. Come in.”

Yumi pulled out chairs, and handed out tea. The two had met in the Newspaper Club clubroom. They were two ‘Hopeful Rookies’.

“How many came?”

“About ten people. There were about seven people who submitted application forms. Some of them had come to register, but...”

Opening the ball-shaped lock on the back, they dumped the newly submitted letters onto the table. Yoshino-san tugged with oomph, and opened the box.

“Ah, you’re right. There’s no Name, there’s no Class, there’s not even an appeal comment on it, only something on the back is written. Wha?! It’s like an opposing vote ‘Matsudaira Tōko-san is eyeing Ogasawara Sachiko-sama.’ What’s this, it’s kinda scary...”

Then Noriko-chan joined in with a black expression on her face.

“It really has a bad feeling on it.”

“Yeah”

It wasn’t just Noriko-chan, these weren’t complaints that were tolerable to listen to. Everyone in the room said “Yeah, it does”, and nodded, but the reason Noriko-chan had said “a bad feeling” had not been just because of the statement.

“Even in class, it feels this bad. The girls who don’t like Tōko-san seem to have a sort of weird filter over their eyes when they look out. There are rumors about whether Tōko-san is or is not participating this time. Ask the person directly, I’d say.”

Stopping when she felt appropriate, Noriko-chan essentially had dropped a scary bomb upon the conversation, after which the conversation became dark.

“So then, what about Tōko-chan?!”

Yumi-asked, and then Noriko-chan shook her head and replied “Everything.”

“Maybe she hasn’t noticed it, or maybe she’s just ignoring it. But she should be pressured about whether she’s entering or not.”

“Of course. Tōko-chan is a very delicate person after all.”

The moment after Yumi finished talking, for some reason, the room fell quiet.

Huh. Did people not think that Tōko-chan was delicate? Or is it that, words like those weren’t wholly in character for her?

Yes, Shimako-san whispered, after much thought to herself.

“But why is Tōko-chan so angry?”

“...Ahh.”

Noriko-chan did not answer. Is it because Noriko-chan thought her answer was vague? Or maybe it was because she was confident in her answer, but was not comfortable with speaking so freely about it? Or maybe she just couldn’t find the correct words to frame her answer in? Well, the reason she didn’t say must be one of those.

“Well, there is also Matsudaira Tōko-san, but.”

Mami-san opened an application that she took from the box and read.

“Hosokawa Kanako-san still has not applied.”

Then one of the newspaper club hopeful rookies, looking as if they would add something to the conversations, raised their right hands into the air and said “Yes.”

“Kanako-san has declared that she will not become Yumi-sama’s sœur, though.”

“I have heard it. But, you know, a woman’s heart is fickle. After she began coming to the Rose Mansion to help out, perhaps her opinion changed.”

As Yumi heard this, she thought to herself “Maybe that’s true”. Even Tōko-chan had said this recently, but Kanako-chan had definitely changed from before. She had taken out her sword and readied herself. She had also become a bit more open in socializing, but did she feel like she was getting closer to her or drifting away. If you roughly handle and hurt Kanako-chan, then you should move your hand back as soon as you can.

“Huuuh. That girl.”

Mami-san slapped the one page application in front of her and laughed.

“She wrote her appeal comment out straight.”

Mami-san stood up, and trained the pitch in her voice, as if she were performing a play on a street, for a crowd of onlookers chanting “What, what?!”.

“From the moment I entered the Student Council, I felt as if I had become a main character amongst the cast of Roses. Whether it is Yumi-sama or it is Yoshino-sama, either one of you, won’t you please make me your sœur?’ and that’s it.”

Either one of you. Well.

“That’s a frank admission, but if you look at the impression that such an admission normally gives, it makes you feel as if their true feelings are masked in silk...”

“Maybe a person with too much self confidence? Or a kid who knows no struggle? Or maybe it’s the result of a fight between two sœurs...”

Yoshino-san rolled her sleeves up meaninglessly.

“First Year, Chrysanthemum Class, Naitō Shōko... Do you know her?”

Noriko-chan answered “No” to Mami-san’s question.

“Isn’t that, maybe it’s Naitō Katsumi-sama’s little sister?”

Yoshino-san said.

“The one who, in order to spend her third year in the same class as Torii Eriko-sama, pushed herself to reach Rank Two on her exams? Of course, she must have a little sister. She’s using her real sister to get revenge upon the Rose Family huh.”

“Isn’t that reason bit weak?”

Shimako-san broke the madly rambling Yoshino-san.

“Why is Katsumi-sama becoming Yoshino-san’s *sœur* a form of revenge?”

“Because, as soon as she would become *sœurs* with me, she would have all the leeway to be violent as she could want. As her Onee-sama, she would hassle me.”

All the leeway to be violent. Hassling the older sister. Just who was the person who was saying all these things. But she stayed quiet, because if she voiced her thoughts, this person would start acting violently.

“Well, if that’s what she’s planning, then why didn’t she write ‘Yoshino-sama, I want to become your *sœur*’? She said either Yoshino-san or Yumi-san, either would be fine. That’s kind of strange, isn’t it?”

“Oh really. Then what is her real motive?”

She understood the point of what Shimako-san was trying to say, but Private Eye Yoshino, when she talked about this ‘Naitō Shōko’ whom she hadn’t seen, her eyes took up a certain cast that knew she would not easily let go of her conviction.

It was one-sided, because Yumi was included too.

(Naitō Katsumi-sama, and her little sister, Shōko-san... Huh.)

When she heard the two names in her head, for a moment it seemed as if she remembered something, but because her head was filled with thoughts of the Tea Party and Tōko-chan and Kanako-chan and Onee-sama and other such thoughts that she could not forget, her head had no way to store any extraneous information, and she would soon forget about it.

She would remember it when, days later, she would meet with the real Naitō Shōko-san.

Part 3.

“Does Yumi-san have any connection with this Tōko-chan thing?”

As everyone was returning, Shimako-san and Noriko nonchalantly split from the main group as they walked down the row of trees. Then Shimako-san stopped and began speaking to Noriko-chan. When Noriko-chan looked surprised, Shimako-san smiled back at her.

“And that’s why you couldn’t say anything.”

“Wooooow... You get it all Shimako-san.”

“Funny isn’t it.”

Yumi-sama and Yoshino-sama walked ahead, and the three Newspaper Club girls turned lightly into a curve, and disappeared from sight.

“If you don’t want to talk about it, then I won’t force an answer out of you. But I thought that, maybe you would want to lighten your burden by talking about your thoughts with someone.”

Shimako-san said the thing that she should have said, and began walking again. Shimako-san kept her hand within reach, so Noriko-chan grabbed it.

“Nope, I don’t want to talk about it with Shimako-sama. It’s nothing, really. Keeping it to myself is pretty tough, but I want to see the whole thing through.”

When Shimako-san was just being herself, she was something. When it came to herself, she would become confused about what to do, but she would always watch over others. That was why Noriko could speak plainly with Shimako-san. Why is such an incredible person my Onee-sama, Noriko sometimes thought to herself.

“The things that Tōko have said... Well, I think she said them because of everyone else’s jealousy.”

Noriko spoke aloud what she was thinking.

“I see.”

Shimako-san nodded quietly as she smiled. The two held hands and began walking slowly down the road in front of the rows of trees, as the group that had passed them up earlier came into view again.

“It’s because Yumi-sama is popular.”

Inside the splendid looking face of the Rose Family, Yumi-sama was the gregarious Onee-sama of the People and the idol of the first-years. Noriko too did not want to lose to the People, but she lacked an easy sense of familiarity. She had a presence, but she just wasn’t Yumi-sama.

“I don’t know who started it, but everyone thinks that Tōko has become Yumi-sama’s number one sœur candidate.”

“Number one sœur candidate?”

“I think it’s because Yumi-sama had asked her earlier to help out at the Rose Mansion, but.”

The idol of everyone just maybe could become the Onee-sama of only one person. Everyone had vaguely prepared themselves for the day it would eventually happen, but they didn’t really want to see it. They just had an idea of what it would be like.

Then again, for the people that already have Onee-samas, how do they talk to her about so many things. If she tried to see how it would feel to involve someone else into her own affairs, Noriko could understand.

“But that’s it?”

Shimako-san said after some deep thought.

“Last year, when I had come to help out the Yamayurikai and even when Yumi-san came to help during the play, there was a bit of commotion, but no-one really hated it. It was the same with you, right Noriko?”

“Yeah, well.”

Noriko nodded.

“But Tōko has said and done some things in her past that make it hard for people to like her.”

“What did she do?”

“Last year, during monsoon season, remember when Rosa Chinensis and Yumi-sama started fighting or something last year, and things got dark between them? Well, everyone says that Tōko was the one who caused it to happen.”

Last year when Rosa Chinensis had taken off from school, a lot of students saw Tōko and Yumi-san’s argument in the milk hall. Then Yumi-sama tactfully asked Tōko to help out at the Rose Mansion, and immersed her into it, after which the rumor sort of died down, but.

“That’s true.”

Shimako-san whispered nostalgically. She was thinking about the first summer right after that monsoon season.

“I know I’m being nosy, but, when Tōko, who had bullied Yumi-sama, was asked to help out, wasn’t it sort of interesting? Because that had happened, she inadvertently got closer to Yumi-sama when she had been targeting Rosa Chinensis.”

“So then, Noriko, you don’t think that Tōko-chan is picking Yumi-san to be her *sœur* because she wants to get closer to Sachiko-sama?”

Noriko nodded easily. Tōko admired Rosa Chinensis, but she would never do something like that.

“So then, what’s happening with Tōko-chan?”

Noriko shook her head in response to Shimako-san’s question.

“I don’t want to talk about it. I’m trying not to hurt Tōko after all.”

“Well well.”

“Well, not forever, but it’s like ‘We have to clean that, so move it’ or ‘You’re not using the bamboo stick, so lend it to me’ or something”

“Are you trying to sew a yukata with regular cloth?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re really saying as little as possible, aren’t you?”

“Ah, oh yeah. There’s something else I wanted to talk about. I had brought the latest edition of the Lillian Kavaraban with me, and I laughed when I thought about whether Noriko-san had talked about this with them, But really, I shouldn’t have laughed.”

Her classmates were excited by it, but Tōko was very angry.

In the shadows, many rumors flew around, none of them with any real hate.

To help out Tōko, Noriko had tried to be the one friend who had kept a straight face about this.

But for some reason, it felt as if she was just running in circles.

Keeping everything inside of her felt bad, but first year Camellia Class, on the surface, looked as if it would keep going smoothly.

“Maybe only my thoughts are strange,” Noriko thought.

Everything really seemed to be fine, but inside of Noriko, her strangeness made everything feel as if it tottered. That must be it.

“I thought Yumi-sama didn’t want Tōko.”

And Noriko stopped abruptly. Shimako stopped walking.

“But, Tōko is”

Shimako got that far, when she realized that glistening things fell from the tops of Noriko’s cheeks.”

“Huh? Why are you crying?”

Shimako-san took her hand out, took her handkerchief out, and wiped the bottom of Noriko’s eyelashes with it. She stared directly at Noriko’s face and smiled.

“Noriko, you like Tōko-chan, don’t you?”

“I do, a bit.”

As she pointed this out, Noriko realized she liked her more than she thought.

As twilight descended, the obscuring of her surroundings was a blessing. It was a blessing that she was away from everyone else, Noriko thought.

Yumi-sama could not notice her feelings for Tōko.

Noriko-chan tightly grasped Shimako-san's hand.

And to keep the traces of her tears hidden from everyone else, Noriko turned to watch a bus go by.



Part 4.

When she thought about it, if she introduced Naitō Shōko to Eriko-sama as her sœur, then Eriko-sama would be very surprised.

Yoshino daydreamed as she lifted her chin from the top of the paper on her desk.

She had no expectations for the Naitō sisters, but if she were just going for impact, then at this moment, Naitō Shōko was the best she could get. But you couldn't find a sœur by just filling out some documents, so she needed to meet her in person. But if she did make Naitō Shōko her sœur, she didn't think it would be as bad as it was supposed to be.

Maybe it wouldn't be that bad, but she knew she was playing with a danger that you could only shake your head at.

The paper was actually a problem set handed out in math class to take home and finish, but because it had become a nuisance for her thought process, she had not finished a single problem.

Perhaps because she was bad at math and wanted to not deal with it, or because she had been thinking about too many other things, or because her thoughts were not letting her solve the equations correctly. Either way, when she stared at the paper, her thoughts seemed to evaporate into thin air.

“Let's do it.”

Now to start, she thought, and rose with determination. When she looked at her watch, it read slightly past eight. It was about time.

Yoshino trailed down the stairs, and she saw her mother in the living room, with a bag.

“I should start preparing now. You're right on time.”

“Huh, what's that bag?”

“Did you come from next door? It's a pastry I bought today at the store. I wanted to share, so I gave your aunt a piece.”

“Why didn't you give me any?”

“Because today you and Rei-chan came back at different times. I knew I had to meet your aunt. I had a reason, but for some reason, I would cancel each time. So I thought I’d let Yoshino do what she wanted, and if Rei-chan came back to her house, I’d give her a little souvenir.”

“If I or Rei-chan doesn’t get back, how does it matter?”

“It’s not a fresh sweet, so it’s fine. The expiration date is the last day of the month.”

“Last day of the month?”

She had remembered something bad.

“But I had to go meet her so... Eh? Am I wrong?”

“No, you’re not.”

Yoshino took the paper back and went out of the door. When she looked inside, she was a little annoyed, but it was her mother, so she let the matter drop.

“Good Evening!”

It was next door, but they were right next to each other. Their front doors were a cheerful stroll apart.

“Welcome. Could you wait a bit, I just finished peeling an apple. Did you bring that bag from your friend? Still this year? I’ll fill up the bag, so just wait there.”

“Ah, sure. Thank you very much.”

No matter how you looked at it, her aunt and her mother seemed to have the same thoughts. Her mother had just talked about sharing a pastry, so the apple made her smile widely.

But.

“Rei-chan.”

Rei-chan looked as if she was completely unprepared for a visit. She was idly staring at the newest edition of Cosmos Friend while sitting on the bed.

“Huh, Yoshino. What’s wrong?”

“I came to share some pastry with you.”

“Huuuuh.”

“--Well actually, I came to ask you for some help on homework.”

Yoshino placed a glass platter where she had put her aunt's peeled apple and the paper she had brought from home onto the low table.

“What's it about?”

Rei had no choice but to get out of bed.

“It's not that simple. But if you just told me which formula to use, I could solve it.”

“I know that. But you came here just to ask me which formula to use?”

Those were not the words of a person who taught, Yoshino thought to herself.

“There's no way you can use the wrong formula here. Open your book. Hey, wait a second. It's the second-year book, so I need to find out where it is.”

Rei-chan would look over her problems, no matter how much time it took. Yoshino held the hand of the person who, in her heart, was her Onee-sama, was her sempai in a club, was her neighbor, and was her beloved cousin.

“Rei-chan, you know, today at the Rose Mansion...”

“...Yoshino. We'll gossip later.”

Rei-chan looked busily through her bookshelves. The ends of her disheveled hair had dust that resembled powdered snow. Yoshino unheedingly went on talking.

“Um, you know. When looking through the list of applicants for the Tea Party, the name of a first year kinda like Naitō Katsumi-sama's little sister was there. What should we do?”

“Huh?”

Rei-chan turned back swiftly. She had said that they would gossip later, but she fell straight into it.

“Don’t you have a bad feeling about this? Because wasn’t Naitō Katsumi-sama Eriko-sama’s rival?”

“Aren’t you changing the subject, Yoshino? If Eriko-sama or Katsumi-sama were still in school, then maybe. Now that they’re at different universities, there’s no reason for them to compete. Aren’t you interfering a bit too much on the affairs of Katsumi-sama’s **real** little sister?”

Rei-chan said, as she took out the math book she used last year. Yoshino loved Rei-chan’s textbooks. If only one word could describe them, then they would be ‘beautiful’. They had not the beauty of disuse, but the beauty of much use. It had important notes added into the margins, and colorful underlines. It had an unmistakable feel of a ‘girl’s textbook.’

“Well, the two sisters.”

As if having won a competition with a small hint, Rei-chan whispered about memory.

“Last year when I fought in that **Taisho’s Fight** with that girl Tanaka-san.”

“Oh yeah, I should be the one who gets revenge for you Rei-chan.”

Unfortunately, because she was a third year last year, Yoshino’s wish to cross swords with her could not be fulfilled. Even though she didn’t yet have the strength needed to play in an actual match.

“That Tanaka-san who graduated, you know this year her little sister is entering. As a high rank too.”

“Hmmp. Is she highly ranked?”

“Well she’s rumored to be. Tanaka-san’s grandfather runs a dojo, and the four Tanaka sisters have a big reputation.”

“Four sisters? From the top, which sister is this?”

From her shelf Rei-chan searched in the book and pulled out a fat volume named “Kendo 3”. These were scrapbooks where Rei-chan cut out magazine and newspaper articles. There were others like “Pastries 6” and “Handicrafts 2”.

“Hey look. It’s in here.”

Rei-chan pointed to something that seemed as if it had been copied out of an area or municipality map. There were even pictures. One picture, which looked as if it had been copied countless times, had a gruff-looking person in it who Yoshino did not recognize at all.

“But it says ‘The Three Tanaka Oonakas’.”

“No, I’m pretty sure that there’s a fourth. A long time ago, when I was in middle school, I had seen the four lined up on a map.”

“So then maybe the fourth one isn’t an Oonaka?”

“I see. Maybe because she’s a middle school student, she’s not an Oonaka yet!”

Yoshino hit Rei-chan with her palm.

“Hey, Rei-chan. They may be sisters but, not everyone goes to same school.”

“Ah.”

Both the Naitō sisters and the first three Tanaka sisters went to the same High School, so not going to the same high school seemed like some illusion.

“Of course. Fufufufu.”

“Haha...”

Rei-chan’s laugh was for some reason androgynous. But the two laughed their guts out. After laughing, stopping, then laughing again three times, a broadly smiling Yoshino spoke while she wiped tears off her face.

“Rei-chan. You know, I’d be happy, if I had a sœur.”

“Eh?”

Rei-chan looked up with a slightly surprised face.

“Whatever kind of sœur she will be, I think my relationship to her will be completely different than my relationship to you.”

“...Yoshino.”

Rei-chan made a painful-looking face, and then Yoshino clapped her hands together.

“It’s not like I’m going to ignore the relationship we have together, Rei-chan. Don’t get me wrong there. The two of us are real cool together, we’re great friends, and I’m proud to think that we get along really well. But you know, it’s a very special relationship. If you look around, there aren’t other sœurs like us.”

“Yeah. You’re right.”

“Rei-chan, were you happy being Eriko-sama’s sœur?”

Rei-chan nodded, but a bit guardedly.

“I’m really jealous. If Rei-chan looked at it later, she’d understand. But even now, I think you’ll understand. Growing up in a different style with a person you don’t know. Making new acquaintances. How should I say this, it’s a very refreshing feeling. So I won’t just let whatever happen to Rei-chan. Whatever happens, even if I find a sœur, I will always really love Rei-chan.”

Clasping their arms together, Rei-chan giggled a bit, and flicked Yoshino’s forehead.

“Well then, I wonder if soon I’ll be able to enjoy both Yoshino and her sœur.”

That would be nice too.

Part 5.

Tuesday.

During lunchtime, Hosokawa Kanako-chan came to visit the Rose Mansion.

At the time, because Yumi and Yoshino-san were in front of the first floor stairs looking through the letters, when Kanako-chan first came in, they thought that she had come to enter the Tea Party.

“I’m sorry that I came while you were in the middle of work. I wanted to speak with you, Yumi-sama, but... It looks like I can’t.”

Kanako-chan said as she observed the scene. But before she set foot into the Rose Mansion, it seemed as if she did not know that this was the place next to the window for the Tea Party applicants.

“It’s fine. One person can handle the letters. If you need some help, just call up to the second floor, and Noriko-chan or Shimako-san will come down.”

Yoshino-san replied to Kanako-chan, or perhaps to Yumi.

“Oh? Alright, then have fun talking.”

Yumi rose from the seat she was sitting in, and joined Kanako-chan in walking outside.

Earlier there had been a number of first-years who had come to have fun, but none of them ended up submitting applications, so the Rose Mansion began resembling a closed store left open. If she left her waiting area now, it seemed as if everything would be okay.

She left the Rose Mansion, and began walking towards no direction in particular.

In the clear autumn day, students in the courtyard were taking walks after eating, and were having fun, but they turned around abruptly behind the school, and the figures of the others disappeared.

“A while ago, I had thought I’d try to come after school to see First-Year Camellia Class.”

“Ah, yeah.”

Unfortunately, neither Kanako-chan nor Tōko-chan were in the classroom then. It hadn't seemed like they had gone home, but the timing had felt a bit odd.

"I'm sorry. I hadn't sought you out, even though every day after school I just plod around..."

"It's fine" Yumi said, as she patted Kanako-chan.

"I wanted to say sorry for asking you to help out during the School Festival. I also wanted a two shot picture with you, so."

"A picture... Ahhh."

Kanako-chan whispered as if a she had just come up to a realization. Yumi wondered what had happened to the picture, but when she thought the idea shown on her face, she added "Of course, I haven't forgotten about it."

"Maybe, if you work hard during the School Festival, then we can take a picture together, is what I had promised."

"Take a picture together? You have the gall..."

It was that, the Kanako-chan she knew directly after the Athletic Festival looked dangerous, so she used an excuse to become friends with her. Because in spite of what had happened, Kanako-chan had once been a person who hoped to have a two shot with this now un-deified Yumi-sama.

"Well, whatever you had said about the pictures, Yumi-sama thought that I worked hard with her during the School Festival, and recognized my value. Then I'm happy."

"Of course."

"Good. If I can return the favor, then."

It had been a long time since she had last talked to Kanako-chan like this, even though it hadn't really been that long since she had last talked to Kanako-chan. If Kanako-chan felt the same, Yumi wondered what she would do.

"Because during the School Festival, I put myself in a place where I have to thank everyone so."

Kanako-chan laughed.

“Eh? Huh?”

“For my Dad, and Yūko-sempai. And Chikako.”

Ah, that... She nodded and then shook her head.

“But I didn’t do anything.”

“No, you definitely did. That’s why I have to get you something soon.”

“Kanako-chan...”

Kanako-chan had really changed, Yumi observed. A lot in a very short time. But just how she had changed, Yumi could not put into a single word. It was as if she had taken off her heavy shell, and became light and nimble.

“So then, the reason I came here...”

Kanako-chan cut in.

“You said you had something to talk about.”

Yumi confirmed, and then nodded.

“The talk of the Tea Party is becoming pretty lively even around me.”

“Sorry. Has it been tough?”

‘Even’ she had said, so then it was probably the same thing that was happening to Tōko-chan, but now it was happening to Kanako-chan too.

“It has. But I didn’t really come here to complain. I’m pretty detached in class, so it’s not much of an itch or a pain. But I wanted to talk to someone about it correctly. But I thought that Yumi-sama was the only one who I could talk about my feeling with about this.”

“Feelings?”

The heavy echo that accompanied her words put Yumi on guard.

“I have no desire to participate in the Tea Party.”

“Aaah.”

Not only was she letting others know that she did not want to find an Onee-sama, but she was also declaring that she did not want to be Yumi's sœur.

And Yumi understood this somehow.

Kanako would not become her sœur.

It wasn't a matter of Yumi not choosing Kanako-chan, or Kanako-chan rejecting Yumi, just something vague. The two of them could not become sœurs, so.

Perhaps Kanako-chan had picked up on this before Yumi did. From much earlier, at least that was obvious.

It's somewhat vague, but if she said it outright, then it felt too harsh. It was like a balloon she let go into the wind, whose direction she would watch.

When she felt the conversation became more serious, Kanako-chan changed the subject.

"I joined a club."

"Eh? Really?"

That was like a crack of thunder in her ears.

"Is it the Basketball Club?"

It was the only club that fit her. When Yumi asked, Kanako responded "Yes".

"Before, I had rejected an offer I had been given to enter the club, but now I wanted to join again so."

She was a beginner, so first she had to go to the gym and practice with the wall, Yumi daydreamed. It seemed fun in a way. So that's what she had meant when she had said "after school I just plod around".

"Do you think you can find an Onee-sama in your club?"

"No. The way I am now, I don't think I want to become anyone's sœur. Next year, maybe I will try to find a sœur of my own, or."

"I see."

She didn't say but, to Kanako, Yūko-sempai was the only person in the world who she could call Onee-sama. At least, that's what Yumi thought.

"I think I had been just guessing, but I thought of Yumi-sama like I did of Yūko-sempai."

"Yeah."

Yumi knew that for a while, Kanako-chan had been searching for someone. She knew that when Kanako-chan saw Yūko-san from the School Festival, Kanako-chan thought "She's the one".

"When I met Yumi-sama in this school, it was the feeling I had gotten from looking at Yūko-sempai when I was in middle school. I won't make the same mistake twice. So arrogantly I said, *I* will protect you."

This stuff really happened, Yumi thought to herself nostalgically.

"But I was mistaken."

The thing that Kanako-chan had been after was something higher, and of course she did not follow the real Yumi.

Kanako-chan nodded quietly, then laughed as if she suddenly remembered something.

"What?"

"Yumi-sama thought of a weird example, right? Something like, if one of a pair of twins goes to Mars. Remember?"

"Yeeeah."

It seemed as if she had and had not said it. Had it been before the Athletic Festival?

"I've let it go. As soon as I let it go, it was like a strange force in my shoulders was let go too. Like, it's fine to not pointlessly fight alone."

"Kanako-chan..."

"I couldn't see my adored Yumi-sama again. It was sad that I could not see her, but that person was someone who lived on Mars. If I broke off from this person whose face resembled Yumi-sama's, then I could feel like meeting with the Yumi-sama who was still on Earth. And when I tried to do just that, she turned out to have more meaning for me than I had thought. Somewhere along the way, I had become close with the one on Earth."

That was a very laudable speech, Yumi thought, as she let Kanako-chan keep speaking.

“Yumi-sama was not completely different to the image of Yumi-sama I had held on to. Back then, when you looked at me you had said that everything was a figment of your imagination, so I thought there was no way I could be saved. The phantom was my thoughts. To deny the thoughts I had held to myself for so long... To deny my very heart, that was a very painful thing.”

“...Yeah.”

Of course. It must have been painful.

But now, Kanako-chan laughed.

“When I met Yūko-sempai again, I felt down when trying to think of what I needed to do. When I met her, Yūko-sempai too was like Yumi-sama, just one of the twins. So there was nothing I could do, I thought. Maybe. The Yūko-sempai who long ago chased after the same basketball with me was now living in Mars.”

“Eh, Mars again?”

Kanako-chan squarely nodded when Yumi asked again.

“Yes. Together with Yumi-sama’s other sibling. It’s Maria-sama’s planet, I think.”

“Well... Maria-sama’s planet. Well that’s.”

It was a sort of quixotic thing to think about, but now that she thought about it more, quixotic wasn’t really...

“No, please don’t look like that. It’s a world that Yumi-sama created. And I’ve come to love it.”

It was where the things we loved from our past lived.

Far away, in the night sky, today too it shone well.

Of course, it was so that we would not forget those things that had once existed in this world.

The things we needed to protect, in order to move forward.

“Kanako-chan.”

Yumi held Kanako-chan’s hand. What’s this. Her chest felt heavy.

“We have to take a two shot.”

“Ehh.”

“Yes. We have to, right now.”

She hurried fate. Without waiting for an answer, she walked on. Where would Tsutako-san be now? In her classroom? If not, maybe in the clubhouse.

“But, Yumi-sama.”

“It’s not because I made a promise with Kanako-chan. It’s because I want to take a picture with Kanako-chan.”

For a moment, Kanako-chan just blinked, but eventually she nodded and laughed.

Holding hands, they made off to a slow run.

The dead leaves crinkled and cracked in laughed.

The cold breeze, it felt wonderful.

Kanako-chan. Yumi looked up to the sky and thought.

Good luck.

We might not become sœurs but, we were friends after all.

Part 6.

Wednesday, after school.

Rosa Chinensis finally arrived at First-Year Camellia Class.

“Has the cleaning been finished? Please call Tōko-chan for me.”

Noriko came out (or rather was forced by her frightened classmates) to intercept her, in a rare, dry panic, muttering “Well now, what sort of business do you have with me?” as if she had heard some weird things.

“Noriko-chan looks like Tōko-chan’s knight today.”

“I’m sorry.”

It was almost like, to play a prank on someone, her mother bumps into her. Noriko smoothed the pleats of her skirt with the palm of her hand, and hid searching for the pocket around her thighs. A knight, what a comparison!

“I’ve heard that the Tea Party has caused her a lot of difficulty. So when I come to visit, here you come out as if on watch.”

“No, well that’s.”

At that moment, Tōko, who had gone to take the cleaning log to the Staff Room, returned. But when she saw the two standing in front of the door, perhaps she thought it didn’t involve her, so she simply nodded towards them and headed towards the wall.

“Tōko.”

Noriko called out to the figure whose back straightened suddenly.

“Rosa Chinensis has come to see you.”

“Me?”

Tōko-chan said slowly, as she turned.

“Well, what sort of business do you have with me?”

Maybe Rosa Chinensis found it funny that Tōko’s words were the exact same as the ones that Noriko used. She laughed dryly.

“I just have one thing to ask you. It’ll be over soon.”

“Is that so?”

So please listen to me, it seemed that Rosa Chinensis would add. The corners of Tōko's face changed slightly as she waited. Noriko had become a third party whose role of mediator was finished and who could take the stairs out and leave, but she looked back and found something catch her eye. She began talking.

“Uh, whatever you want to do, can we do it somewhere else?”

At all times of the day, the entrance to a classroom which had just been cleaned was full of people.

“You're right.”

Rosa Chinensis nodded, when Tōko stiffly said.

“I don't mind. Please speak your mind.”

Noriko-chan listened and felt her heart beat faster. Rosa Chinensis wryly smiled.

“I too do not mind. But, Tōko-chan, you tell me that you do not mind even before hearing what I want to talk about. So maybe you have an idea of what I want to talk to you about.”

“Tōko.”

Leave this to me. A mad urgency came into Noriko, and her eyes reflected it. It was as Rosa Chinensis said. Even though she did not know what Rosa Chinensis was to talk about, Tōko had rashly come to her decision, so Tōko herself would be the one to suffer.

“Tōko-chan. You should listen to your friend's advice.”

Tōko gave no answer to Rosa Chinensis's remark. But it was obvious that that was Tōko's obstinate sort of agreement.

“It would be better if we didn't do it at the Rose Mansion.”

When Yoshino heard about what Rosa Chinensis was planning, Noriko thought to herself “Maybe what Rosa Chinensis has to say has to do with Yumi-sama.”

Rosa Chinensis began walking, but she stopped once and looked back.

“Noriko-chan, won't you come with us?”

“Huh?”

Noriko was of course surprised, but Tōko made a “Why?” look on her face. Because maybe Tōko thought that Rosa Chinensis’s news dealt only with herself.

“You’re Tōko-chan’s knight, aren’t you?”

“What does Rosa Chinensis intend to do with Tōko?”

Rosa Chinensis laughed.

“I already told you. I have something I want to ask her about.”

It was the laugh of an evil bad guy. Whether Noriko would play the role of knight or not, she wound up having to come along.

“Why aren’t you applying to participate in the Tea Party?”

Rosa Chinensis asked Tōko as soon as she began walking.

“Why? If I wanted to apply, then shouldn’t I have a reason to apply?”

“It seems to me as if you do.”

While she was looking for a place to talk, it seemed like the talk was already nearly finished. Or maybe she had chosen to ask that question while walking because of the other people who were around them. Either way, the two began talking. Noriko, who walked behind them, tried her utmost to pick up leaked words from the conversation.

“I wanted to say this so no misunderstanding would come between us. I care not who becomes Yumi’s sœur. Except I do not think it best that she choose you.”

“So then why are you trying to push me into applying?”

“I didn’t come here to tell you to apply. I only came here to find out what your reasons for not applying were.”

This was what Rosa Chinensis had said. With words like those, Tōko could not help but feel instigated.

“Why do you want to know it? I want to ask you something. If I tell you, what will you do?”

“I won’t do anything. I’ve been watching you lately and getting a bit irritated. I want to find out a reason that will let me find out why you’ve been acting like this.”

What selfishness. What high-handedness. But this was Rosa Chinesis’s cunning, this was the part of her which was her strength.

“Of course our little chat must be troubling for you. I’ve come here just to fulfill my own selfish desire after all.”

‘Ah. She noticed it herself,’ Noriko thought.

“Looking at Tōko-chan is like a painful look at my past self. To live frankly is a very courageous thing, but there are several shades of that.”

Tōko said nothing. She held her head down, became expressionless, and stayed silent. Whether she was listening or not I did not know. But Noriko felt that she was very carefully, very acutely hearing each word.

“That was all I had wanted to say. Take some time will you.”

Even though they were only part of the way down the corridor, Rosa Chinesis made a hand signal that showed that this was the end. She exited and left the two alone.

“Rosa Chinesis probably made a mistake. That’s what I really think.”

Noriko told Tōko. They were weren’t meant for Tōko, rather than to follow up what Rosa Chinesis had said.

“But I think Tōko-chan is thinking ‘No more’ right now, so it’ll be better if I leave.”

Tōko had no need to do what any old person told her to do. If she believed the advice in her heart, then she would follow the person’s advice and do exactly what they said.

“That’s why, I’m probably interfering way too much but, just stop.”

Noriko took out the application addressed “First-Year Camellia Class Matsudaira Tōko” out of her pocket, and ripped it into pieces. She had predicted that Tōko would not come to the application registrar for the Tea Party until the last moment, so just in case, she had one application prepared. The issue wasn’t whether she would use it or not, but more that it would be used as insurance.

“That’s...”

Tōko opened her mouth slowly.

“I’ve already ripped it apart, so I’ll go home and throw it away.”

She took the pieces and made them into a ball, and put the ball into her pocket.

“Noriko-san.”

“Well then. Let’s go back to class.”

Nothing had happened yet.

Let the pebble that Rosa Chinensis had thrown grow and ripple in her heart, and spur its own action.

That was all Noriko could do.

Welcome To the Tea Party

Part 1.

The electric kettle was whistling and steaming away. “Cup... Check. Spoon... Check. The black tea... Is still in there.” It was Saturday. One forty-five in the afternoon to be exact. In the Rose Mansion, Yumi was preparing for the tea party by ticking off the needed accouterments with her finger. What looked to be a reception was coming from downstairs. Yoshino-san was carrying in two big woven handbag-looking things.

“These scones have arrived from the Confectionery Society.”

“Whaa.” Hot and fresh. The still steaming scones were inspected. Just peeping over the bag was a face. Delicious! Delicious!

“If Mami-san explains them, you’ll understand. That said, I have to return...” Yoshino-san thus reported. She hastily scrawled a name on a name tag at the last minute. Mami-san replied, “Roger,” which was her way of agreeing.

“But, why scones?” While it was sweet and nice smelling, Yumi had to ask.

“If one’s talking about a tea party, the first thing that comes to mind is afternoon tea. If one’s talking about afternoon tea, it should be black tea and scones.”

“One... Two... Three...” The count was enumerated by Mami-san. “Given the number of people, we should have plenty,” was mumbled.

“Except... Can we really accept this?” Although a provision of scones had arrived, until now she hadn’t heard a single thing about them.

“It’s okay. It’s okay. Because the distinction is: ‘support.’”

“Support? It’s a problem when we don’t discuss these things beforehand.”

Yoshino-san crossed her arms in front of her breast and then spoke. “The Confectionery Society said that they had wanted to keep this a secret. If they turn out to be well-prepared we should dig in. It seems they don’t have much confidence.”

Comparatively they were baked well, but just to be sure Mami-san took one out of a handbag and with her hand broke it into a trisection (although the room was not limited to three occupants). This size could only be called a “taste.” Yumi and Yoshino each tossed a corner into their mouths.

“I’sh good!” Munch, munch. It had an elegant and not too sweet taste. It seemed to be suitable for black tea.

“So? Do you still want to complain? Obviously, it’s not easy to think of this as a free gift but...” Although Yumi wanted nothing more than a taste, Yoshino-san requested that Mami-san give her an explanation for the scones. Because one piece had already been issued and approved, she probably would be staying now.

“Since it’s the Yamayurikai, it won’t be bothersome. I promised to only take pictures of the scones to be placed on a staff-recruiting ad for the Lillian Kawaraban.”

“A shrewd business person.”

“One hand washes the other.”

Mami-san acquired the face of a bad magistrate in an historical play taking a bribe. “We won’t be setting up the shot until we put a plate of scones out.”

Because there were many visitors today, the amount of cups, spoons, etc. housed in the Rose Mansion was insufficient. They subsequently borrowed some from the Home Economics room. For now, they would borrow to supplement what they had since there wasn’t time.

“Isn’t it okay if we just put out this basket?”

“I guess so.” Thus, the woven basket of scones was arranged in the center of the table. Having done this, the room’s preparations were complete. After that, all that was left was to invite the guests.

Desks and chairs from the school basement storeroom were borrowed and carried back. Although it was unusually tight--no, to be frank it had become considerably cramped--it seemed like it was probably all right. Immediately, all the members present took their seats and began to partake of one cup of tea each. Although they were drawing close to the appointed hour, if there was any free time, would it be all right if they went to the first floor room? Because the weather was favorable, they asked each other might it also be good to go out into the courtyard?

"Come to think of it, is Tsutako-san downstairs? I want to take a photo of the scones before it's too late," Mami-san inquired. With one hand, Yoshino-san poked the bread.

"Oh yeah, that's right. Tsutako-san, Tsutako-san! That Tsutako-san, who a moment ago couldn't refrain from talking about photographing the tea party; of course, she doesn't hear."

When the scones from the Confectionery Society had arrived, they had garnered all the attention. Although, Yoshino-san was going up to the second floor, Tsutako-san's purpose was to convey the message to the two people who were there. After they went to the second floor, they brought in the scones... Is all that had actually happened.

"Why are you hesitating?"

When the plan for the tea party was announced, Tsutako-san and her tripod were dispatched, and two "okay"s were given. Even this morning, when they attended the exact same class, of the three people present no one witnessed an ounce of hesitation on her part. Then, letting all this time pass, and even going so far as to come to the Rose Mansion, to simply refuse? Tsutako-san must have had some urgent business she was forced to run off to.

"She was saying something like, 'The place where the participants will enter and exit, if I maintain an adequate distance, I'll be able to get a snapshot. After the tea party ends, we'll arrange for the participants to hold a group photo, and then I'll capture a proper photo.'"

“Then, if the conditions are bad or there is some other crisis, there’ll be no problem.” Meanwhile, she might simply be saying, “I’ve had a change of heart.”

“Tsutako-san was saying, if there’s an outsider playing cameraman, the participants will be conscious of being photographed and probably won’t be able to relax. See, even with an imperial court’s dinner party, on television the dining halls are not depicted. It seems to be the same case here.”

“Yeah. I have a hunch that is a terribly perfect reason for her disappearance.” Therefore, she must have been caught up in a strange fetish. But still, Yumi was not easily convinced. Isn’t Tsutako-san an obedient spirit?

“Since we’ll be standing by in the club house during the tea party, if something happens, please call out. I don’t want to have to tell you that, but... Is that all right?”

“That might work, and it might not. I can’t forcibly bring her back, can I? But that’s fine. After all, I did bring the scones. During the tea party if there’s a request for it, despite being incompetent, I can become the cameraman.” Mami-san took a miniature camera out of her pocket and took pictures of the scones. She took photos from the right side and then from the left, changing the angle again and again. Because she was afraid it might not come out, she kept taking more shots. The shutter was closed with great frequency. The Confectionery Society is the same way - they are not altogether confident in their skills.

“Mami-sama, Umm... We should begin accepting guests soon...” The newspaper club underclassman who had been standing by on the first floor, and was now in the room on the second floor made a face.

“Ah! That’s right. The name tags... Name tags...” Mami-san had just finished scribbling on a name tag. Having done so, she left only two in the pile. Mami-san then stuck the remainder in a box, which was handed to the newspaper club rookie.

From among the two remaining name tags, Yumi and Yoshino-san wrote their own personal name tags and attached them to their chests. “Second-Year Pine Group Fukuzawa Yumi” “Second-Year Pine Group Shimazu Yoshino” As for those in attendance, an invitee would also stick a name tag to her chest.

“Well, then.”

The newspaper club rookie confirmed the number of name tags and left the room. Mami-san called her to a halt with, “Wait a second.” Her junior club member obediently stopped. Yumi saw this and thought “What now?”

“The extra cups that we’ve borrowed...”

“Yes.”

“We have the cups... And we have the scones, and we have the blank name tags...”

“What’s your point?” While she was questioning, Mami-san took a magic marker and furiously wrote a name. She produced two new name tags. “I was thinking Tsutako-san had mentioned the principal reason. Even though we’re collecting data for the newspaper article, we’re not Yamayurikai staff. If we continue to just wander around in the Rose Mansion, I think it will be a distraction. So...”

“Second-Year Pine Group Yamaguchi Mami?” Yumi took her name tag in her hand and read out the characters’ pronunciation.

“That’s right. We also have the qualifications to participate.”

“US?!” The underclassman took her name tag and held it up so they could see. Obviously, a cheek was pulled out in chagrin. Why was her name written there? The rookie underclassman’s name read, “Takachi Hidemi.” In so doing, Yumi learned her name for the first time.

Part 2.

In front of the Rose Mansion entryway, there were already guests assembled. In the window of the door, a person's figure was reflected. That form was projected onto the inside floor of the Rose Mansion. The appearance was accepted but Noriko wanted to know who was there.

If one was to check a clock, after another five minutes it would be **2PM**. The commencement time had been written on the formal invitations, along with an exact greeting.

"It's almost time." Shimako-san muttered.

"What should we do, I'm a little nervous."

"Noriko, how is it that you are nervous?" She realized such restlessness cannot be easily calmed.

"But, our future comrade might be here."

"That's true. But for us, all we can do is help Yumi-san and Yoshino-san, if only just a little." Creeeak. Creeeak. That kind of sound was heard coming down the stairs. When one turns to face it, until a little while ago the scene above us could have been seen. Hidemi-san had returned.

"You brought the name tags." This was the Confectionery Society's empty box that had had name tags tossed inside. hey took them out one by one and placed them on the desk. The students lined up silently, by order of school year. Hidemi-san somehow had seemed to be low-spirited just a little while. Something on the second floor had inconvenienced her? It was at that time that Shimako began to get worried.

Something caught Noriko's eye. "Hi... Hidemi-san. That name tag... You don't mean..." Pointing at Hidemi-san's chest, Noriko cried out. She need not have so deliberately pointed it out. Hidemi-san had stuck the blank square plastic name tag on. Compared to the schedules and name tags that would be distributed to the invited guests, there was hardly even the tiniest difference. On closer inspection of the name tag that had characters crammed together on white cardboard with a black magic marker, "First-year Peach Group, Takachi Hidemi" had been written.

“Yes.” Hidemi-san’s shoulders sagged. Reluctantly, Mami-sama was also attending the tea party. One could make a case that she had snuck in to collect data for the newspaper club... But if you thought about it, that wasn’t necessarily true.

Recently she had been persuaded.

“Huh? Hidemi-san, isn’t it a rule that you can’t participate?” Shimako-san mysteriously asked. Hidemi-san was saying she fervently disagreed with the state of affairs by way of her making a face.

“It’s not like that.” It was not like such a rule actually existed. It was fifteen minutes before the commencement-if the tea party attendants were made to wait, it was natural they would be bewildered.

“That’s a problem.” Shimako-san voiced her earnest sympathetic concerns. However, after running up to the second floor, Hidemi-san’s removal proved to be an impossible appeal. Something like “reluctance” was given as a response. Hidemi-san herself had already consented.

“Perhaps she’ll make for an ideal candidate.” Noriko also cheered her encouragement. Because of this, for Shimako to consider herself a wonderful Onee-sama, she must bite her tongue.

“An ideal candidate she says...” She muttered and sighed. Hidemi-san stood facing her.

“Because such circumstances have arisen, it won’t be possible to be away from the Rose Mansion much during the tea party.” When they had planned the party Mami-sama and Hidemi from the newspaper club had both agreed to come and help out, but if Hidemi was attending the tea party, such help will be curtailed, is what Shimako thought.

“It’s okay, right? If something happens, Noriko or I can go. If it’s something like office work or routine duties, don’t worry about it. Please allow us to take your place greeting people.” At Shimako-san’s words, Hidemi-san offered no resistance. “Okay,” was her only response.

“Well then, at two o’clock, please begin the reception. I will humbly meet with Yumi-sama or Yoshino-sama, at two.”

“I accept.”

“To quote Mami-san, ‘Your job will be to receive the written invitations and student notebooks. After confirming the person in question, please present their name tag.’ So that’s it, and thanks again.”

With her head lightly hung, she staggered up the stairs. Given such a knack for “infiltration for the purpose of newspaper reporting” it was difficult to judge whether or not she would be successful. Nevertheless, it was worrisome.

At any rate, when two o’clock eventually arrived, Noriko opened the entryway door and invited in the guests. “Sorry it took so long. Please come in!” At Noriko’s greeting, the guests responded with, “Good day.”

“Although it’s lengthy, please come this way and form a single file line for reception.” While Shimako-san was guiding traffic in front of the desk, Noriko was counting off “1... 2... 3...” In all, twenty-five people had entered the Rose Mansion. As there were neither late arrivals nor absentees, the door was closed for the moment. Such a thing was quite wonderful.

After school on Wednesday when the audition application process was closed, the final number of applicants was fifteen from the first-year, combined with ten from the second-year. Because at first they’d planned to have no more than twenty from each, all of the written invitations could be delivered. Was the difference in the number of applicants from the first- and second-years probably due to the fact that, since they were only shooting for two Boutons, the first-years felt they were more committed to the outcome? Or did it have to do with how many days remained in your campus life for a first-year versus a second-year? In either case, if one were to divide the first-years and second-years up in a folk dance because they could only dance with an opposing grade, even if the number isn’t equal they won’t care.

They had noticed when preparing the actual room that because of the number of people scheduled, having it work as something like a buffet line seemed rather good. They were thinking that sort of thing while carrying in the desks. However, when you thought about it, it wasn't much like a lottery. Even though Tōko had been able to apply and participate, regrettably, Noriko felt her absence keenly. In the end, Tōko had not applied.

"Once a person has finished at reception, please advance in line, and climb the stairs to the second floor." No mistake, it was plainly stated as the foundation of fundamentals. The worn down stairs had been used so the group didn't swarm the entrance. They received written invitations and student notebooks, confirmed their application and handed out name tags. It was a simple operation but, a challenge in avoiding boredom.

They finished receiving the second-years and they'd begun to move to the second floor. As she was helping to organize the first-years, Noriko who'd entered Lillian at the high school level, and since the classes were mostly separate, there were students she didn't know.

"Good day. Welcome to the Rose Mansion."

"Good day, Noriko-san. Thank you for your hard work." Even though she didn't herself know this or that person, the other party certainly knew her. Since becoming Shimako-san's sœur, this sort of thing happened frequently.

"Thank you, it seems like this will be a wonderful meeting." Before, Noriko had thought it bothersome but lately she had been rather enjoying the exchanges. When she spoke, because she was Rosa Gigantea's little sister, she wasn't seen as anything but that. Because Shimako-san was in the Yamayurikai, such is where the relationship had been born. In other words, Shimako-san had connected her through this loving relationship. She thought it was important.

The last girl to come to the reception table had soft shoulder-length hair.” First-year, Chrysanthemum group, Naitō Shōko.” She was an unremarkable girl... But on closer inspection she thought, “Ah, how cute.”

Since Yoshino-sama had said various things, what kind of strong candidate might appear, she thought. As usual she would be cute, and as such refined with a tender facial expression, either way she must be affectionate, was the kind of person she was hoping to find.

For Shōko-san, being in Rose Mansion was a rare treat. She snaked about and investigated the vicinity. Since she was curiously investigating everything, she had ended up being last.

“Here’s your name tag.”

“Oh, thanks.” Shōko-san temporarily stuck it to the chest of her uniform. After hesitating at the desk, Shōko-san asked, “Other than the tea party attendees, who else is here?”

“Come again?” While collecting the written invitations, Noriko’s twisted her neck around. What was it the girl had asked? “Umm... The Lillian Kawaraban reporting team is here... Is what I’m thinking.”

Thereupon, the nearby Shimako-san who’d been listening replied. “With the exception of the attendees, only those two who are holding the tea party. Noriko and I are doing this for the two journalists in the Newspaper club, because they are also attending the tea party. I don’t think it’s anything to dwell on.”

“The newspaper club... And...”

“And? If perhaps you mean *Rosa Chinensis* or *Rosa Foetida*, they will not be attending today.” Noriko anticipated the answer. With the exception of those two, the “And” she was referring to was not hit upon. But, Naitō Shōko-san had indicated an “and” so it might possibly have been someone other than the Roses.

“No, umm...” Shōko-san looked down and hesitated. Afterwards, “I see,” was spoken and voluntarily the conversation was ended.

“Shōko-san?” There was probably something else she had failed to say. Thinking that, Shōko-san looked up with a smile and laughed.

“I’m sorry, I’ve taken up your time. I had better get upstairs, I’ve made everyone wait.” Already the figure of the person with the naturally curly hair disappeared up the stairs. Noriko silently watched the back of the figure take her leave. She tapped on Shimako’s shoulder.

“Well, if it was something important, I’m sure she’ll state it properly later.”

“I think so.”

“Yes. Well, let’s go up stairs as well.” “It’s all right” was the thought that was nodded with a smile. Noriko also climbed the stairs to the second floor. The tea party had begun.

Part 3.

“We thank you for coming today.

For this meeting, the Lillian Kwaraban composed the invitations. Though we're the one's that want sisters, we don't have any relation to the people who wrote them for us. 'Let us provide a place to meet' is what we want to do here. Although an hour and a half is indeed a short time, most of us are given plenty of time to make close friends in school. But for those people who do not get the opportunity, we would like to receive you for the chance to deepen their friendships.”

...While giving this ridiculous greeting Yoshino thought, “How many invited guests can we expect to keep with such a serious, formal greeting?” more importantly, aren't we too busy to evaluating, to deepen any friendships?

Look, that second-year student is checking out the face and name of that girl whose eyes resemble plates.

Anyway, the guests entered the room in order and took their seats. After drinking one cup of tea, they made self-introductions. When there was free time they were encouraged to move their chairs. At that point, the students were asked if could they take their seats. They're probably thinking this is the key that divides victory from defeat, because everyone moved frantically.

It was 1:16PM.

As the number of first-years was greater, if you thought about it, realistically a second-year student had the advantage and it becomes something like a market. But it isn't that simple: several first-years are obviously only aiming for one second-year. Therefore, even though it was only 1:16PM, they had some time to find a suitable partner, it seemed.

Look, that first-year student. Plainly, she had eyes only for Yumi-san. Because of the sheer number of people greeting each other, she could only be seen for two seconds here, and five second there. It would be thought considerate to approach this person.

“...That is all. This tea party is going to set a good precedent.” Even though the guests were restless, Yoshino brought it to a close in a suitable place. No one liked a long speech. Her head bowed to the light applause and Yoshino took her seat. During the greeting, Shimako-san and Noriko-chan concluded the tea preparations, the purpose of which was for Yumi-san and herself to distribute.

“Umm, I can help...” Yumi-san was targeted. A first-year student was beginning to approach and lifted her hand to help.

“I appreciate it truly, but I can manage.”

“Please sit down everyone.” Because one person dashed out, suddenly “Me too!” “Me too!” was heard and everyone jumped up from their seats. This was only a narrow assembly hall. If they all stood up and converged on the same place, how could they continue? But if you thought about it briefly, it was understandable. Finally people settled into their seats.

For practical purposes, Yoshino carried up the tray. She poured out five cups of black tea. That’s serious! When it started it looked like a great migration of Water Buffalo, she watched in awe and her hand almost slipped instinctively.

“Here, please don’t get up.” Was this an announcement in a bus that was approaching a stop, a **tsukkomi** might have quipped? Still, this attempted riot of good intentions was received and their feelings were conveyed. Most first-years started to stand up, only one girl remained seated calmly and their eyes met.

Smooth curly hair. Yoshino noticed and they exchanged smiles.(Hehe...) It was strange but she was flattered and liked it. Because of that, it didn’t come across as unsociable. In Yoshino’s case, because the idea comes across as somewhat devious, even though there were hands saying, “I’ll help,” it’s still attractive. She wanted to doubt that this was some way of “earning points.”

Nevertheless, even though the plan at first had been for an elegant tea party from beginning to end, somehow it had ending up being like a slapstick comedy from the start. According to the schedule, it was not going well.

While the tea brewed, the self-introductions began. Suddenly a “leadoff batter” in the guest’s introduction ball game was needed, and because it was an awkward situation, Yumi-san stood up from the organizer’s side.

“I’m Fukuzawa Yumi, from the second-year Pine group. I have no favorite subjects in school, or any I’m particularly bad at. I basically get average points. My Onee-sama is Ogasawara Sachiko. Umm... The end.”

What... Was that? Yoshino stared at her smiling best friend’s usual humble self-introduction. Saying you get average points is not the way to sell yourself at all. Moreover, giving your older sister’s name... Everyone here knows her name.

“I’m Shimazu Yoshino, a second-year in the Pine group. I belong to the Kendo club. Since there might be first-years who aren’t aware of it, I had an operation on my heart last year and I was able to shed my image as a weak person. My favorite writer is Ikenami Shoutarou. My hobby is watching sports. My wish is to have a little sister as soon as possible. Since I haven’t thought about it until now, by all means, someone who has free time announce your candidacy...”

With this challenge, she didn’t make it a “command” like the character “rei” (command) in Rei-chan’s name. Meeting Rei-chan’s eyes, ready to refuse any caller at the gate, Yoshino faced it head on.

“I’m Yamaguchi Mami from the second-year Pine group. I serve as editor-in-chief for the Lillian Kwaraban. We thank you for always reading with interest. As you know the newspaper club has helped with this tea party from the planning stage. If this tea party is successful in finding a cute little sister or two, it will only be an extra bonus and we will be lucky. That it was possible to join this circle of friends, gives me strong feelings. Thank you for your consideration.”

“I’m Takachi Hidemi, a first-year in the Peach group. Until this project came about, I didn’t give much thought to getting an older sister. But now because of the newspaper it seems interesting and I can’t help it. If I’m able to meet someone, I would like it to be someone who would help with my newspaper club activities; she would assist with great understanding. Therefore, having an older sister is really quite a boon.”

As expected, because she wasn’t able to say something like, “I was reluctantly sucked into this...” She chose her words carefully as she introduced herself. But... Once again, such an introduction did not sell herself at all. Hidemi-san implicitly said, “If you become my older sister, it’ll be a problem.” It was something like throwing a ball to a base to check to a runner.

They continued on with the general participants’ self-introductions. Since they weren’t accustomed to being in the Rose Mansion, it was like they were straining, or they wouldn’t give themselves the chance to slow down in fear of slipping and saying something crazy. Only in their self-introductions did they feel safe. There was scarcely a promising candidate that had been caught in Yoshino’s net.

Around that time, that girl with the light hair stood up.

“Naito Shōko, of the first-year Chrysanthemum group.” Ahh... This girl. Yoshino’s body unconsciously leaned forward. “When I attended middle school, I longed for the Yamayurikai. Even if I’m only able to become acquaintances with them, I’m happy.”

(During the time she attended middle school, her real elder sister had been betrayed by Torii Eriko-sama of the Yamayurikai. Now she can take her slow revenge, and she’s happy.)

Yoshino thought to herself, half in jest. But such thoughts are actually somewhat meaningless. Yoshino could not find a single thing about Naito Shōko she disliked. She was a pleasant girl. Perhaps Naito Katsumi’s will had been quashed from the beginning.

“Hey.” she touched Yumi-san’s arm, who was sitting next to her. She was wearing a different expression - she’d found Naito Shōko.

“I found her...” Yumi-san subdued a laugh and muttered. Yoshino was quite impatient. I found her... She had said. But found what?

Perhaps she means she found a little sister.



Part 4.

“Yumi-sama what kind of little sister do you hope to find? Someone friendly and cute like me? Or like Rosa Chinensis, who’s beautiful and prideful?”

This was free time. Free time was the time set aside to stand up from your seat and chat with someone who might be feeling shy. Yet...

“Umm... That’s... When I stop to think about it, I guess that’s not really what I’m feeling.” For a while now, Yumi had found herself stuck in her chair. She was surrounded by three first-year students and was encountering a barrage of questions. She had been cornered, as if in a **Shōgi**-style pincer maneuver. It had become impossible for her to move, like a cornered Shōgi piece. Having sat in a chair at the end of the room had been her fatal mistake.

In truth, she had wanted to have a discussion with Naito Shōko-san, but such thoughts had been ground to dust with the intervention of these three. Because they were doing her a courtesy she was happy, despite being blocked from her goal. Thus, she answered their questions one at a time. It was impossible to simply say, “Could you step aside and let me out?”

“When sœur meet for the first time, is there really an impact like a crash of thunder?” The person asking the question was Aiko-chan. When it had come time to prepare the tea, she had been the first to step forward.

“Who can say. I think each person feels differently about it.” In Shimako-san’s case, the elder sister and younger sister’s first meeting place was under the cherry blossoms. They each seemed to have experienced an impressive first meeting. Though in Yoshino-san’s case, she had known Rei from the time she was born, so she wouldn’t likely to have been very excited when they became sisters.

“Then, how about in Yumi-sama’s case? How did you feel when you met Rosa Chinensis?” Chigusa-chan asked with glittering eyes.

“Because I had admired her for a long time, my heart was pounding! But, in Onee-sama’s case her feelings about it were indifferent.”

“No way!” Nozomi-chan gave a small outburst.

“It’s true. But after a while I forgot about that meeting.” Because of the feeling behind Yumi’s words, all three laughed explosively at the same time.

“What’s this? Yumi-san’s gotten herself a harem.” Yoshino-san happened to be passing by and was heard to tease. “I’m jealous. I wonder if I wouldn’t be able to join the group?”

The first-years of course said, “Oh, please do” and opened a path. Yumi however had only been thinking, the more the merrier. The three first-years had probably also felt that way. Chigusa-chan stood up and gave up her chair. Yoshino-san said “it’s okay” and slapped Yumi’s hands with hers.

“Time to switch.”

“Huh?” Confused. Yumi forcibly stood up against her will and settled Yoshino-san into the seat. As they were changing places, she heard whispered in her ear. “Yumi-san, you were thinking you want to talk to that girl, don’t you?” That girl... In glancing over her shoulder she saw that it was Naito Shōko.

“Wow.” she understood what she meant and was surprised.

“Don’t make fun of your best friend. I have a special insight on such things,” was what she said. Then finally she said, “it’ll work out fine.”

“Yeah.” Afterwards, she made up her mind with a nod and left the circle. Yumi cocked her head. Why did Yoshino-san say, “it’ll work out fine” and how did she know what Yumi was thinking? Yoshino-san is a person capable of telepathy after all, isn’t she? However, the tone of voice that had said “it’ll work out fine” had been lowered, so maybe she was a little bit worried. Looking back at Yoshino-san, the first-years who had been chasing Yumi, seemed to have calmed down. She joined her hands together in thanks in her mind. Yumi called out to Shōko-chan.

“Good day. Are you having fun?”

“Yes.” Mami-san, who had been sitting at Shōko-chan’s side, was just departing. Yumi took the seat that had just been vacated.

“Naito Shōko-san. There’s been some gossip that you’re Naito Katsumi’s real little sister, but...” Was it true? When she heard this, the girl came back quickly with an acknowledgement.

“It’s not that I was hiding that fact. But given that my older sister has graduated... And besides, even if I were to say that, wouldn’t it work against me? It probably wouldn’t open any doors for me, would it?”

“Why not?”

“Because probably my older sister didn’t leave the best impression on the persons of the Yamayurikai.”

“I’m not sure.” Yumi didn’t herself have any first-hand knowledge of Katsumi-sama. The omniscient Yoshino-san had been the one to have made something of a squawk.

“Since I’ve entered high school, I’ve been asked again and again about the time my older sister was enrolled here. I don’t really resemble her. So why does the conversation naturally flow to that question? As a cram-study person, she held this kind of event in derision. She seems to have seen Torii Eriko-sama as a rival.” She was put-off by Torii Eriko-sama!

“But you and your sister are close, aren’t you?”

“That’s not so. Since we were little, we’ve repelled each other.”

“Oh...” She was thinking of a comparison, but did not voice it. “Then, because you’re the opposite of Katsumi-sama, you came to think you want to work with the Yamayurikai?”

“Not quite. Last year... No, this year on Valentine’s Day you held the Treasure Hunt Event. At that time...”

“Valentine’s Day Treasure Hunt?” Once again, unexpectedly the conversation had turned to that.

“At that time, I was a student in middle school but, it looked like it might be fun so I came to the high school.”

“False start.” At Yumi’s words, Shōko-chan laughed and recognized it was a “false start.”

“At that time, I saw Yumi-sama energetically running around.”

“OH! Yeah, that.” She didn’t want to remember too much which would conjure up the image. Rather than the Treasure Hunt, it was more so the chase. Frantically running around with their skirts fluttering, it gave the girls a dreadful appearance.

“It looked awesome, vivid and fun. Yeah, it was good. I had nothing to rely on for what the Yamayurikai were like but the image portrayed in the Lillian Kawaraban. I was aware from the outset that they were real flesh and blood people.” Vivid... It wasn’t what she was saying; it was how she was saying it. Shōko-chan continued.

“Since I entered high school, I’ve paid attention to every occasion. I was engulfed by surprise and thrilling emotion at the new student reception. I still can’t forget it. At the Sports Festival, even though I should have just been one student, unrelated to the Roses or the Boutons, why was it everyone’s eyes were always being drawn to the Yamayurikai staff?”

“...” What would be an acceptable response? However, no matter what was said, it looked as if she was opening the floodgates and spilling her heart out. It didn’t seem like Shōko-chan’s momentum had abated in the least.

“And then, the culture festival. The play was wonderful, but... The thing I envied the most was in the Photography Club’s exhibition hall. The panel had been decorated with everyone glittering and shining in their photos.”

“The Photography Club’s panel?”

“I sincerely thought I wanted to become a part of that existence. How could I be admitted? I’ve been thinking about it all this time. Then I learned of the plans for this tea party.” Ahh. So that was it. At last, she understood.

“Therefore, either Yoshino-san or I would be an acceptable partner, right?” What is it that Shōko-chan desires? And to grant such a wish, who had it in them to fulfill this serious need? Perhaps, that person already exists. In that brief moment, various feelings ran through Yumi’s head.

“I’m sorry. I was being too foolish and honest. I’ve offended you.”

“I’m not. It’s just... Listening to your story. Shōko-chan is feeling misunderstood.”

“Misunderstood?” Shōko-chan cocked her head. “What is being misunderstood? I don’t really understand it myself.”

“If you can’t be in the center of the Yamayurikai, your life can’t be vivid. But even if you are able to be in the center, it doesn’t necessarily mean you’d be able to be vivid,” Yumi said.

“It’s not that the only fun things in high school can be found in the student council. Where are you looking? What do you want? There are a lot of glittering people, so if Shōko-chan only wants the glitter found in a photograph, it’s not necessarily here. Even if you can’t become a Bouton, wouldn’t it be all right?”

Shōko-chan had been silent while Yumi was talking and listened. Because she was wise, if she was only able to say this much, she is likely to have understood:

“In other words, I’ve been rejected, right?”

Yes, Yumi nodded. Putting aside the words, Yumi had only decided not to make Shōko-chan her little sister.

“For me, I want to choose the person who sincerely wants to become my little sister. I want you to find an irreplaceable Onee-sama for yourself.”

“In that case, since I was thinking either would be good, trying for Yoshino-sama would be useless.” Shōko-chan glanced over and saw Yoshino-san. Yoshino-san was separating from the three first-years near her. She was calling on another first-year.

“Don’t worry about it, it’s just my soliloquy.”

“Your soliloquizing pierced my chest and struck home.”

“I’m sorry. Did I offend you? Please balance my impolite appeal and comments.”

“I understand.” Yumi held out her right hand. Shōko-chan offered her hand in response. “I was able to understand, and it was refreshing.” They shook hands. Even as they were shaking, if she were asked, she wouldn’t be able to explain it well. However, at that point they were both glad of the meeting of minds. The meaning behind their words could be conveyed to both parties.

“My aim was to become a Bouton but I’ve been able to modify it.” With those words, Shōko-chan departed from Yumi’s side. She wasn’t sure whether or not she’d be able to find an Onee-sama., but proactively talking to all the second-years and first-years, the tea party had been fun.

Now, if Tsutako-san was here... She who could not be surpassed with her culture festival exhibition panel photos. She would have been able to bequeath a smiling face... Yumi thought it was only a little bit regrettable.

Part 5.

“Shōko-chan, do you have a minute?” When the hour-long tea party was beginning to come to a close, Rosa Chinensis en Bouton called on her. When she finally noticed, there was a strange kind of beckoning from the other side of the door. Shōko hastened to reply “yes” and stepped forward.

“Can you lend me a hand?” was asked with a subdued voice. Although Nijō Noriko-san who happened to be passing by called out, “can I help you with something?” Yumi-sama asked Noriko, “Well, could you get me another cup of black tea?” and then she faced Shōko. “Actually, I need to request an errand. It involves leaving the Rose Mansion...”

“An errand? That’s fine. Where am I going?” As Yumi-sama was one of the organizers, she was not likely to be able to leave the Mansion with impunity. Shōko understood this and accepted the request. “If I’m able, I’d like to help.”

“You saved me. The where is a clubhouse. After you get to the Photography Club room, there is something I’d like you to bring back.”

“The Photography Club?” Upon hearing that phrase, her heart was made to soar.

“You know where the clubhouse is, right?”

“Yes.” She nodded with vigor. What should I do? She became flustered. “But, I... Am not a club member.” Although she eagerly searched for an excuse to refuse with, none were forthcoming.

“It’s okay. When you enter the clubhouse building, it’s on the second-floor. When you find the Photography Club’s club room, knock on the door. There should probably be someone inside. Ask if it is possible for that person to give you something for me. So, pretty easy, right?”

“Y-yeah.” She easily agreed to go; she couldn’t say it was unpleasant. If she had not wanted to do it, it would have been necessary to give a reason. There was no helping it. Shōko psyched herself up.

It wasn't that it was unpleasant. Only, what if there is someone there... Thinking about it, I might want to run away. Before she entered the Rose Mansion, it had seemed impossible to have a meeting here. Somehow, she had been able to prepare herself just in case.

"I understand. What is that you would like to have brought?"

"A picture frame. Something bought on a school trip. It has a marble pattern, so it should be recognizable." A picture frame at the Photography Club. Such an item being there is hardly surprising, but why would it need to be retrieved at this moment?

"That's right. It'll be all right as long as you bring it by Three-thirty." Yumi-sama checked her wristwatch as she said this.

"Three-thirty? But that's only thirty minutes from now." Shōko was getting more and more uneasy.

"That's true. Do you think you won't be able to find it that soon?" I don't doubt it, but if it takes too much time to find this inconveniently placed location... There's no helping being late I don't think.

"If you run out of time and can't find it, it's all right to come back."

"Well then, I'm off." Her shoulders were pushed in encouragement and Shōko climbed down the stairs. Although various unclear points remained, I'm going to try and go anyway. The stairs seemed to want to say something: a creaking sound was made.

It was dim in the clubhouse-the corridor was not lit. As it was already Saturday after school, it seemed there weren't really any club activities going on. After confirming with the building map that was drawn at the entrance, she climbed to the second floor. The Photography Club room sat next door to the Newspaper Club.

The door was ajar; only one person was inside. She was sitting with her back to the door. That person... It was someone Shōko knew. Just as she knew she'd be... It was this person's aura she'd felt. Before Shōko had time to knock, the person turned around.

“Oh.” She smiled. She was not at all surprised. Her reaction was as natural as if they had promised to meet here today. “It’s been a while, first-year, Chrysanthemum Group, Naito Shōko-chan.”

Despite the fact that eight months ago she had not introduced herself with her last name, Takeshima Tsutako-sama knew. She also knew Shōko’s present class name, or if she didn’t know she surely guessed correctly.

“When did you learn about me?”

“Quite a while ago. As soon as you entered in April maybe. During the Treasure Hunt, you were a middle school student. Indeed, I shouldn’t have been able to find you.”

“I apologize for that meeting. I was embarrassed. It was not possible to meet with Tsutako-sama more naturally.”

“No, no. It was the same for me, since I wasn’t able to approach you until today. It’s mutual.” After bowing deeply and silently to each other, Tsutako-sama said “Please” and pulled a chair out for Shōko to sit.

The Photography Club’s club room was actually much narrower than she had previously thought. It was probably around a four and a half tatami mat-room. Because there was a desk and shelf and things like that, it felt considerably smaller. Yet it was possible to have club activities in here; she surveyed the room and admired it. In the wall, she spotted a door. When she had entered, it had not been through that door—there was another. Probably that place served as their darkroom. So this was also a front room. The faint odor of chemicals lingered.

“After that, how was it? Were you able to get your photo taken? Is it old hat to you now?”

“I haven’t become accustomed to it that easily.”

“So it’s ingrained?”

“Yes.” While discussing her story, Shōko’s interest shifted onto another topic. Until Shōko had come today, what had Tsutako-sama been doing? She must have been doing some kind of work-the top of the desk was not too cluttered. It looked like the Photography Club had been asked for a set of bound prints. They’d been able to make a simple photo album with cardboard and vinyl. Wrapped in construction paper, the package was about the size of a textbook. And then there were the two cameras that could be called her hallmark.

“You were looking for me?” Tsutako-sama had said until just recently she hadn’t been able to locate Shōko. She understood that loud and clear. There was no way she could have misunderstood.

“Yes. Since immediately after Valentine’s Day. But, I couldn’t find you. Then the new school term came and despite looking here and there, I couldn’t catch a glimpse of you. I started to feel like I was being picked on by a kitsune.” Tsutako-sama laughed. “Speaking of being picked on by a kitsune, it also happened again recently.”

“Recently?”

“Among those waiting in the courtyard for the Rose Mansion door to open, I saw Shōko-chan.”

“Oh...” So Tsutako-sama had been there, and maybe even in point-blank range. She had been near enough to spot me in the crowd. What kind of expression did I have at the time, Shōko thought? And then at the tea party, she must have seen her application. What kinds of things was Tsutako-sama feeling?

“That was why...” Tsutako-sama said.

“Didn’t you promise to take a photo of the tea party gathering? But then you didn’t show. Was that... Because of me?”

“It was only an excuse. At first I thought, wouldn’t Shōko-chan be able to enjoy it better if I wasn’t there? But then I began to think, guests other than Shōko-chan would be nearby. So that’s why...” Tsutako-sama sat resting her chin in her hands. “So how did it go? Was it enjoyable?”

“Yes.”

“That’s great. Ah, that reminds me, the tea party? Is it over?”

“No. Yumi-sama sent me on an errand...” Shōko finally remembered. Seriously, that person forgot she needed to use something.

“Yumi-san did? What was it?”

“She said she wants me to bring her a picture frame.”

“A picture frame?” Obviously the expression on her face said “I can’t understand.” Tsutako-sama asked her to repeat herself. She probably had no idea what was being asked for.

“Yes. One with a marble pattern. Seems like it might have been something bought in Italy...” While Shōko was trying to remember the particulars of what Yumi-sama had said, she spun around the room searching with her eyes. “But, there isn’t, is there. I just realized. She just made it up.” That... Is embarrassing. No doubt the problem will have been corrected when she returns empty-handed. In her search, she looked inside a cardboard box on the shelf without asking first. From somewhere there came a voice mumbling like chanting the **nenbutsu**.

“Why would Yumi-san’s private property be in the Photography club room? No there isn’t anything. So really, the thing Yumi-san wants, what was she talking about?” That is the question. Tsutako-sama had put it to words.

“Um, excuse me.” Shōko gave a rapid an apology. Without thinking, she apologized to the nenbutsu jukebox. It bothered her for a moment after hearing it. “In the first place, did Yumi-san really buy a picture frame from that shop?”

“Umm... Hey, Shōko-chan...”

“The thing that Yumi-sama said to come find to bring to her. I don’t think she said it was a personal effect.” Thereupon, Tsutako-sama formed a “wait a minute.....” Shape with her mouth. Did she say something wrong? When Shōko began to worry, Tsutako-sama looked down at her right-hand perplexed and choked on her words.

“She got me.”

“Whaa?”

“After Yumi-san knew I had left, you were sent over.”

“Huh? Someone must have told her where you were, but who?”

“Umm...” Where was the proof of that? Yet, Yumi-sama had known that Tsutako-sama was in the clubhouse. It was Yumi-sama who had sent Shōko. Therefore, she formed a hypothesis that Yumi-sama had wanted Tsutako-sama and Shōko to be able to meet. However, assuming such a hypothesis was correct, why would Yumi-sama scheme towards such a thing? It remained a mystery.

Certainly, Yumi-sama had mentioned the same story of the picture frame just a little while ago. But at the time, Tsutako-sama’s name had not been included.

“Come to think of it, when Yumi-san was last here, she had seen this... Which is why,” Tsutako-sama touched the construction-paper wrapped item. “But that doesn’t explain our current situation.” However, when she mentioned that, it didn’t really explain anything, since she didn’t know the contents of the package.

“Ah, sorry. I’m also having trouble wrapping my brain around this.” Tsutako-sama said, “here” and held out the parcel to Shōko.

“What is it?”

“You can open it. This is the reason you were sent here.”

“This was?” Even though she said she could open it, it was taped fast so she hesitated. She would have to tear it open. What was inside? She couldn’t help feeling reluctant.

“After Shōko-chan suddenly appeared again, I hastily wrapped this in case I got the opportunity to give it to you. I only had this to wrap it in.” At the same time Tsutako-sama apologized Shōko flung off the wrapping paper.

What else would have been there, except of course for a marble-patterned picture frame? This was what Yumi-sama had wanted to have brought back: it bore those features.

There was already a photograph inside. A sepia-tinted beautiful photograph of two girls, opposite each other. What was discovered in the box was so sweet. Seeing this, why was her chest tightening? If you assume that Tsutako-sama had taken this, she was indeed a wonderful photographer.

“It’s a present.”

“What?”

“But, I promised, didn’t I?” When she said that, Shōko finally realized what this was. The one girl in the photo was her elder sister Katsumi. And the other...

“It can’t be. I, how can I be this pretty? And, Onee-chan, doesn’t have such a kind face.”

“But, this IS Shōko-chan.”

“...Yes.”

“And there’s no mistake, it’s your sister, right?”

“Yes.” Shōko embraced the picture frame. Though she was near tears, she endured laughing with all her might. Because you generally cry for something like this, Tsutako-sama surely thought she was a strange girl. She didn’t want that. With effort she was able to speak because there was a congenial attitude.

“Thank you very much. I will make this photo a family heirloom.” With that, she sealed the fate of the photograph she would keep her entire life. But it was okay. Previously she had had a worried expression, but knowing this photo exists, it was all right.

“You’re exaggerating.” Tsutako-san laughed, but Shōko had been serious. Regarding the photograph, their features really did seem inaccurate somehow. She had seriously carried that kind of worry.

“But what should I do with the picture frame then?”

“Idiot. Honestly, do not take this to Yumi-san. It is for Shōko-chan alone.”

“But... That...” This picture frame, doesn’t it resemble the one Yumi-sama described? However, she’d been told this wasn’t Yumi-sama’s property.

“Didn’t I tell you it’s a present? Getting you this photograph took so long... I had no excuse. If it’s okay, please accept both the photograph and the frame.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course. It’s a souvenir for Shōko-chan, it’s something that I bought.”

“I am so happy!” Because it was a fantastic picture frame, she was happy. But what made her far happier was the thought that during the time Tsutako-sama had been traveling around Italy, she had been thinking of Shōko, if even for a moment.

“And, by way of bribery, let us open negotiations immediately.”

“Huh? Negotiations?”

Tsutako-sama laughed with meaning.

“Actually, there isn’t yet a photograph of Shōko-chan. For me, when it comes to the culture festival or an exhibition, or any time there’s a Lillian Kavaraban column, though the text has been written, to get a photograph for the column I have to obtain permission to publish it. Which is what I’m asking for.” Having said this, the Photographer presented her with a photo album. When she turned the cover and flipped the pages... There were head and shoulders shots and full-length portraits, as well as candid snapshots. They were all of Shōko.

Shōko walking on a carpet of cherry blossom petals. Shōko briefly under an umbrella. Shōko joking with her classmate, her head wrapped in a sports towel like a turban. Shōko playing water polo. Shōko taking the baton during a relay race in the Sports Festival. Shōko dancing in the folk dance. Shōko touting her class at the Culture Festival. Watching the end of the Tale of Torikaebaya, Shōko absentmindedly wandering around for a moment.

How could this many have been taken without her noticing?

“Please give me permission to publish these,” Tsutako-sama said suddenly. Yet even if Shōko did that... Rather than directly answering, her face grew damp and finally she looked down.

“Oh. You won’t. Well, you can approve and disapprove individual photos...” Probably because Shōko remained silent for a long time, Tsutako-sama became a little timid? She was offering a concession.

“...It’s okay.”

“Huh?”

“All them. It’s okay. That is my answer,” Shōko looked up and said. “Please make additional prints for me. Of all of them.”

Tsutako-sama saw them running off Shōko’s cheek. She was surprised by Shōko’s frankness. But because “I can’t handle this,” was written on her face. Until just now she didn’t think she’d be able to defend herself, but now she was able to give a smile and the album to Shōko.

“If I knew I could get an okay so easily, I would have asked sooner. In that case, it’ll be in time for the School Festival.”

“That’s right.” Shōko quickly wiped her eyes and nodded. Not announcing myself until today, my actions were blinding me to my shortcomings. Without asking why, Shōko couldn’t have spoken up.

At the School Festival, if these photos could be seen, Yumi-sama’s words concerning her feeling “misunderstood” would end. Such a turnabout could take place.

“I took these photos without your knowledge so you wouldn’t worry. It made me truly happy. But now you’ll probably be alert to being watched.”

“Then...” whenever she felt something it would be “Tsutako-sama’s camera” aiming at her, probably. It was likely to make her heart throb.

“Now you see.” Even for one more day she wanted to continue to have her picture taken in secret. Because Tsutako is a high school girl who goes to the same school, it would be permitted. If it was an outsider and a man, the label “stalker” would immediately be applied.

“Well then.” It was about time, so Tsutako-sama stood up. After checking her watch, it was three twenty-five. They had approached the end of the tea party.

“I need to take a picture of everyone as a souvenir.”

“Wha...” Shōko made a pose. “It’s okay, but...” Tsutako-sama, laughing, grabbed up her camera. As they left the club room, Shōko followed up in entreaty.

“Please try to take a photo of me before I notice you.”

“That’s impossible. Since it’s a group photo, I’ll have to say something like “Okay, say CHEESE!” otherwise other people would be angry.”

“Whaa. That’s the worst kind.” It had to be taken candidly-- then it was okay even if it was the worst picture.

“Isn’t it okay to have an occasional plain photograph?” Tsutako-sama was saying as she locked the door to the club. She probably said this because something irresponsible had been said. “If it’s a group photo permission must be got before it can be put out.” But Shōko thought that to an extent it had been good idea. Since Tsutako had immediately said, “it’s impossible” the idea was rejected.

“You read about the tea party rules didn’t you? Only people who do not mind articles about themselves in the newspaper or seeing pictures of themselves should apply.” Certainly that had been written but she didn’t feel good about it. She had no choice. If it had come to that, then so be it.

“I admire your escapism.” Leaving the clubhouse, because she thought they were going to have to dash to make it on time, Tsutako-sama had been forestalled. Why would she have been likely to read it?

“It was an escape when I was processing the photos and put Shōko-chan’s portrait in a balloon.”

“Whaaat?” Oh no, she was acting childish. Tsutako-sama sighed and said, “I know, I know. Then, of how many ever were taken, I’ll chose the best one and give it to you.”

“Really?”

“Really. It’s a fact. It’ll be a secret, okay?”

“A secret!” Shōko laughed and clung to Tsutako-sama’s arm. She loved Tsutako-sama’s photography. She loved Tsutako-sama.

At the Rose Mansion, even though there wasn’t any student council work left, they were able to glitter for the camera. She held these things close to her heart: there was so much of herself in that album. The photos Tsutako-sama took of me, one-by-one, that was the proof.

Eventually, Shōko returned to the Rose Mansion with the picture frame by three-thirty. She had completed Yumi-sama’s errand though it had become a moot point. Even so, Yumi-sama did not ask Shōko to offer up the picture frame. Given that Tsutako-sama accompanied her back, she especially let the matter drop. Tsutako-sama met with Yumi-sama and spoke briefly.

“Yumi-san, you’ve become somewhat meddlesome. I’ve lost my edge.”

“What’s this? Regarding what?” while laughing, Yumi replied.

“That’s quite enough.” At times, Yumi’s meddlesomeness may have resulted in a blunder. Though putting the consequences aside, her attitude seemed to be “without some kind of meddling it couldn’t have been accomplished.” And considering her friend’s feelings in retrospect, she appeared to be fairly happy with the results.

When she looked at Tsutako-sama’s face, Shōko realized she was too.

Interim Report

Part 1.

After school at the Rose Mansion on Monday, Sachiko-sama asked, “So? How did it go?” Although she omitted the subject, Yumi didn’t need her to specify. Onnee-sama was seeking her report on the tea party.

“There were two sets of girls that became sœur right then and there. Afterwards, I wondered if it was a good idea to let them go through with it. But after knowing each other a little more, they will probably decide for themselves what they really want. There were quite a number of participants; because of the meet and greet, there is the potential for a great many sœur to form.”

The newspaper club was in the process of publishing the particulars. By way of an announcement, the article “The Tea Party Sisters” and the situation of those sœur was being chronicled in the Lillian Kawaraban. While drinking black tea, Sachiko-sama acknowledged with “hmm... Hmm...” and listened to the report. Before long, Yumi said, “That is all,” and brought her report to a close. Sachiko-sama put down her cup and frowned.

“The thing I want to hear the most about is my little sister and Rei’s. The two sets of sœur who formed that day, were either of you involved in forming one?” She used sufficient intensity. Yumi and Yoshino-san couldn’t think; they just looked at each other.

“...We weren’t.”

“Impossible. Neither of you did?” Her eyes caught a momentary flash of sunlight and shined. It was scary. But, there was no way they could lie about this. They just honestly confessed.

“It’s... Not possible.”

“I see...” She was stunned. Sachiko-sama sighed with a disgusted face. Rei-sama had heard the gist of it from Yoshino-san. “Forgive me, I already knew as much,” was the kind of vibe she had gotten and patted her shoulder. Sachiko-sama didn’t give up quite that easily.

“Well then, how would you say your situation has changed from before the tea party began?”

“Well, if that’s how it’s going to be...” She clapped her hands with a pop. “To the first-years who said they wanted to become our little sisters, we will call on them to come and help out after school. Because there was too many for any one meeting, we divvied up days to have them come, and that’s what we’ll do starting from today.” For Yumi there were three helpers and Yoshino-san had two. Because there were only five, for Monday and Tuesday there would be one person each. Since this was a Monday, Aiko-chan who stuck to her like a puppy had said she was coming to help Yumi.

“I see. Well, where are those girls now?” Twisting around like a snake, Sachiko-sama rather unnaturally glanced about her. But even if she were to check, she must know there was no one else in the room other than the usual Yamayurikai members. Anyone could see her ill-humor reflected in her actions. Neither Shimako-san nor Noriko-chan would be rushing to Yumi’s rescue. The god you don’t touch can’t curse you. If they reacted individually, it was understood the situation would escalate.

“That’s strange. I wonder if they got lost on the way.” Yumi answered with an insincere smile. In response, the angle of Sachiko’s eyebrows increased.

“If it’s true, they’re not winning any points toward becoming your little sister. But how might one get lost after coming to this school for a half a year I wonder. Given that they came to the Rose Mansion just the day before yesterday, for them to require someone to guide them here is problematic... No, rather it’s unthinkable.” Darn it! Yumi thought, but the damage had been done.

“Onnee-sama, you must be joking.”

“Why would I joke, it’s not a laughing matter? At least you can laugh, compared to a little while ago.”

“I’m sorry.” But, she couldn’t understand why they hadn’t come. Aiko-chan who had tentatively been one of Yumi’s little sister candidates, would feel more able to come and go freely. It was troublesome for Yumi. In spite of that, she needed guidance. Sachiko-sama couldn’t say flat out, “I don’t understand why they haven’t come,” so she had inadvertently let her feelings escape in jest.

When they had been deciding who would be coming to help today, Aiko-chan had been the first to raise her hand. Because she was so enthusiastic, she would have been thrilled to be the first to show up. Surely she could not have forgotten.

At that moment...

“Good day. I’ve come to help.” Aiko-chan had her utmost spirit switched on as she entered the second-floor room.

“To help...” It would soon be four o’clock. All the Yamayurikai members checked their watches at the same time, which meant they also immediately saw the time on their neighbor’s wristwatch. The question of whether or not her watch was wrong, she was likely to have confirmed it. It looked entirely like a scripted scene from a play. And yet, that didn’t change the fact that it was four o’clock.

“Oh, everyone’s gathered, huh. From the first-year Plum Group, I’m...”

Without waiting to introduce herself, Sachiko-sama asked, “What’s this?”

“Huh?”

“Because you suddenly show up at the last minute to help, did you really plan to come? If so, don’t hold back and trade places with someone. If this was a situation you could not get out of, it’s not necessary to try and come and overwork yourself. Since we’re short-handed, it’s not a bother. However, in such a case, properly inform us in advance of your absence.” Even though this was her little sister’s little sister candidate, for the moment Aiko-chan was at the fulcrum of being half a Rose Mansion guest, and half a Yamayurikai apprentice. Although Sachiko-sama was restraining her temper as much as possible, what had to be said was stated firmly.

However...

“No. I hadn’t planned on being absent. Only, in order to meet the Roses and everyone, I ended up spending time preparing my appearance. Actually, today was Phys. Ed., you know. Having my hair in a headband is a habit I don’t take lightly.” Her reply dumbfounded everyone present.

“I... I see.” Sachiko-sama had already forgotten that she was angry. Her face was drawn back. This was bad. This was considerably bad. Yumi took Aiko-chan’s hand and pulled her to the corner of the room.

“Look, it doesn’t matter what your hair looks like.”

“Huh? But, I couldn’t come before Yumi-sama with a shameful appearance...”

“I just splash water on my hair. It’s not something I would come to hate you for. But you can really save me by cleaning the room or preparing the tea. Even if you say you want to help, isn’t it impossible to immediately entrust the work of the student council to you? While first doing the odd jobs, the people here will come to depend on you. That’s what’s called for.” At that point she was finally able to speak. Aiko-chan seemed to have noticed her mistake.

“Yumi-sama, I... What should I do?” Tears followed. At this late hour, a task like cleaning the room would be impossible. Everyone had already served themselves tea.

“I understand so calm down. First why don’t you pour yourself some tea. While you’re at it, offer everyone refills. It’s okay. Then we still need to tidy up. When you arrive it’s good to take the initiative and wash and hang the cups.” Keeping attentive to both this side of the room and the other, Yumi spoke quickly in a whisper. Onee-sama was serious.

“Yes.” Aiko-chan nodded. Sachiko-sama appeared to be putting on a performance.

“I wonder could someone refill my tea?”

“Yes, right away.” Aiko-chan hurried to see to the teakettle. As a way of saying “thank you” Yumi bowed her head to Sachiko-sama. Onee-sama’s older sister had also been serious.

Part 2.

“Ah, Rosa Foetida. Excuse me, could I have your signature?” It was Tuesday after school. Yoshino’s little sister candidate had come to help out.

“Signature?” Actually she should have gone to her club activities. Rei-chan should go but, it seemed like this little sister candidate seemed worried. She had ending up coming to the Rose Mansion while still wearing a **dougi**. When she saw that girl’s face, it had seemed like she was ready to visit the **Budoukan**.

But being asked for her signature just after meeting her, it was the same as yesterday with Sachiko-sama’s face cramping up. “This is what I feared,” Yoshino thought.

This first-year student was a Rei-chan fan. Though she didn’t know whether or not the person in question was aware of it, the girl had become considerably bubbly. Even still, this first-year had said she wanted to become my *sœur*. Even though I thought she had been deeply moved, in the end her aim had been to get close to Rei-chan. My pride was ripped to shreds. Why would I want that girl? (Although it’s a waste, should I eliminate her from the running?)

Two candidates vs. three candidates. Even when I’m at my best, Yumi-san beats me in the number of followers. If I were to eliminate this person as a possible candidate, that only leaves one. What should I do, Yoshino? (But unlike Yumi-san’s fan from yesterday, this girl wasn’t late; she’s light on her feet. And she’s not overly cheerful.)

She was earnestly searching for a good candidate, so she restrained from rounding her choices down to one. In the end, she would ride roughshod over the objections. In my report to Rei-chan, there would be my name and a blank next to my chosen *sœur*.

As it is, Rei woozily left the room. It was like her life energy had been sucked away. In such a state, would her kendo practice be all right?

“Ah, Rosa Chinensis. Rosa Chinensis would you also give me your autograph?” (I withdraw my previous remarks) Rather than being one of Rei-chan’s fans, she might just be a simple follower of each new fad. When those fad-seeking hands reached toward Yumisan, Yoshino’s cord of patience was finally cut.

“You’re fired.” That girl didn’t understand why Yoshino lost her patience. For a while afterward, her eyes would be made red and swollen.

Part 3.

On Wednesday, Nozomi-chan came. She brought four of her classmates with her. Drinking tea and chatting, they came and went as quickly as a storm. Then came Thursday. Misae-chan introduced herself as Yoshino's little sister. Yoshino-san paid her heed for only a moment. Crying, she returned the way she had come. They had planned to have Chigusa-chan arrive on Friday. In the end, she didn't come.

And then the fated Saturday arrived.

The Crucial Battle

Part 1.

Well, she didn't have very high expectations. Having appeared at the meeting place at the appointed hour, the Rosa Chinensis sisters and the Rosa Gigantea sisters only made a total of four people.

"Did Yoshino-chan leave already?" Sachiko-sama asked Yumi.

"Yes. She isn't in the match, because for the time being she's only tentatively in the Kendo Club. But because she went with Rei-sama and company, she was excused from cleaning duty." Although they normally hold matches at the school on Saturdays, this was the regional tournament for high schools. Yumi and her friends, who were ordinary students, would be attending class through the fourth period, go to homeroom, and after cleaning duties were finished they would gather at the entrance. All of which was identical to last year's regional tournament, though the group members had changed. Sachiko-sama and Shimako-san and Yumi were returning. Noriko-chan was joining the group this year. Yōko-sama and Sei-sama from last year were absent. More than an entire year had passed since that time.

"The others... I guess they won't be coming, huh."

"Seems like it." The bouton's five little sister candidates, because it was a fun outing, had been asked if they wanted to come and help out. Although they had been invited, not a single one had come.

"Yumi's three sister candidates, and Yoshino-san's two, no matter what they might have added, they should still have come." That appeared to be her standpoint but, there was Yoshino-san, who had said, "You're fired." to one girl. Another person had already left in tears. Probably neither would be coming.

"We've waited five minutes. Let's go." As this was Sachiko-sama's judgment, no one opposed it.

“Yoshino-san wasn’t able to introduce Torii Eriko-sama to her sister,” Shimako-san said while walking.

“Yeah.” Yumi also nodded. Probably because Yoshino-san had still not met up with Eriko-sama, it certainly seemed like she wouldn’t be able to now. However, if those two candidates couldn’t come to the match, it seemed it was only a matter of time before, “I wasn’t able to make it,” would be the reason for all of them.

“If you think about it...” Sachiko-sama muttered. “Noriko-chan was quickly able to commit. Tōko-chan and Kanako-chan as well, when they changed their minds, they certainly understood why they were doing it.” Somehow, compared to the five sister candidates, they at least have valid excuses.

“I’m sorry.”

“There’s no reason for Yumi to apologize. Surely, those girls are just your average female high school students. If possible though, it needs to start with you leading them properly.”

Even if I had wanted to guide them, there’s nothing to be done if they choose not to come. I’m only able to pull them so far. Onee-sama, I can say with confidence that these candidates were terribly inadequate. Yumi thought they were shameless.

“That was probably a flight-of-fancy, wasn’t it?” Noriko expressed her opinion.

“Flight-of-fancy”

“To be with a Rose or a Bouton. They were only acting on their longing. ‘I want to approach her, if only a little.’ They were thinking that was what they wanted. ‘If I can be by her side, only wonderful things will happen.’ It was that kind of a flight-of-fancy. But, such a thing has no basis in reality.”

“They became disillusioned?” It reminds me of Shōko-chan a little bit, Yumi thought. For her, if she became a little sister to a Bouton, she believed it was possible to glitter like in a photograph.

“If it was a flight-of-fancy, didn’t they come to realize it? Until now, if they were longing for the Rose Mansion, they hadn’t actually thought about what they would do when they got there. Since they simply hadn’t thought it through - to one day be abruptly thrust into the real world would be baffling. The tea party guests were like that, they would have been happy.” It was just an educated guess, but Noriko-chan ended her supposition. It certainly seemed like what she’d described, Yumi thought. If that was the case, about this time they would probably have hurt feelings. Those poor girls.

In the park that surrounds the civic gymnasium, there were mainly three types of uniforms worn by the wandering girls and boys. A familiar scene was unfolding. When they arrived at the assembly hall, more seats were filled than there had been last year. As expected, they were divided into couples who seemed like they could do nothing but sit. Thus, the Red Rose sisters and the White Rose sisters decided on where they would meet after the match ended and they broke into two groups. On the way to finding their seats, they each bought and carried a sandwich and a carton of milk coffee. With a “Let’s Go!” the two began to search for a pair of empty seats.

“Look, Onee-sama, over there,” Yumi pointed and then ran.

“Huh, Yumi?” From what she could tell from behind the rows, she thought she’d discovered a pair of chairs that had not been taken. However, there was also the possibility that someone had simply put down their bags to reserve their seats. First she approached the scene.

“...” Okay. No personal affects. “Um, these aren’t taken, are they?” she tentatively asked the person in the next seat.

Then that person answered, “If you want to sit, leave the sandwich.”

“...” Was this the Oitekebori spirit?

“Why is Sei-sama here?”

“Because it’s probably going to be interesting. Or so Eriko heard.”

“E... Eriko-sama?” The absent “Eriko-sama” was simply repeated in question. It wasn’t that she called out in particular. But nevertheless, from Sei-sama’s side, a voice responded.

“Yes.” Whoa. It was the person in question. She raised her hand in terribly good humor.

“Go... Gokigenyou, Eriko-sama.” Although it was natural that Eriko-sama would be here, when she appeared before Yumi’s eyes she honestly thought, “Oh, Yoshino-san you really should not make such rash promises.”

She said incidentally, it was not only Sei-sama that Eriko-sama had invited.

“When seen from the back it’s possible to think that...”

When Sachiko-sama finally arrived, to the person sitting next to Eriko-sama, she greeted her with, “Onee-sama.” That’s right; she was addressing Yōko-sama. During the school festival it had not been possible to visit with them. And now before her the set of all three former Roses sat, so today she could make the time.

(Oh.) She had brought along her two best friends. Then, Eriko-sama told how today was the day she had been looking forward to. It’s only natural: if Yoshino-san could’ve introduced her little sister, she would’ve said, “Please look upon her.” Then she would feel drunk with victory and would have happily waited for the evaluation of that little sister. Anyway she would have, if she were able to introduce her. This... Will not be pleasant.

“Yumi-chan. How is Yoshino-chan faring?” As soon as Yumi was seated, Eriko-sama stretched her body and asked.

“How’s that?” She must exercise discretion in her response. Eriko-sama was speaking glibly. Although she was being made to speak, it was not necessary to say too much. All the while, Sei-sama and Yōko-sama, who sat nearby, remained silent and listened. How would Yumi get through this crisis? It was interesting and they wanted to see the outcome. Why is this happening? And yet, they were both smiling.

“When she saw the box of sweets, she felt resentful, right?”
Ah, that.

“I’m very sorry, but as her best friend it’s not possibly for me to say.” As she was convinced that a discussion of Yoshino’s little sister was perilous, her interaction became awkward.

“I’m disappointed. By all means, I wanted to see her.”

“I, I can’t say anything, but...”

“I understand without your having to say so. If you could only see Yumi-chan’s face.” Yōko-sama and Sei-sama could not endure anymore without bursting into laughter. In a small voice, Sachiko-sama said, “Idiot.” The first round, no matter who was judging, would have been declared Yumi’s loss.

While Yumi was holding her sandwich, Eriko-sama was forgiven. But immediately after finishing eating and the last droplets of milk had been sucked loudly through her straw, round two had begun.

“By the way, what kind of girl is Yoshino-chan’s little sister?”

“Who knows.” Incidentally, it seemed that before coming here the three former Roses had supped at a family restaurant. Sei-sama’s “leave it~” must have been a joke. But, while letting her mind wander a bit, as expected, one piece had been eaten.

“Yumi-chan, don’t play dumb. Didn’t you just say that Yoshino-chan is your best friend? As a best friend, it’s not that you don’t know.” It figures. Even though she should have been more attentive, she may have already tipped her hand.

“That’s because, I haven’t been introduced yet.” However, the key point here was Yumi’s knowledge of “what kind of girl” she was. As this was something she was incapable of knowing, there was no way she could answer.

“Probably, Rei-sama doesn’t know either... I don’t think. Also, Eriko-sama is probably the first person Yoshino-san will notify.” Hearing this, she seemed to have become more relaxed. Eriko-sama ended the second round too quickly. You could say it was a tie game.

“You’ve created a good smokescreen, Yumi-chan. Well, that’s fine. The longer the anticipation, the greater the payoff. No matter how long you hope to delay it, the matter should be settled by the end of the day.” Even though she merrily gave a beautiful smile, it was strange and frightening. Eriko-sama was serious. It seems she means to settle this today, in this hall, by any means necessary.

She wanted to send a telepathic message to Yoshino-san to “run away.” It seemed like no matter where she might have run to though, Eriko-sama would have definitely followed.

“So... Yoshino-chan’s little sister, which one do you think she is? Didn’t she have three candidates? She should be somewhere in this assembly hall...” To kill time until the start of the match, Eriko-sama had hit on a terrible pastime.

“Oh, that’s good.” She began to feel dreadful, since in reality only the Rosa Chinensis sisters knew that none of the sœur candidates had come. Why did Sei-sama and Yōko-sama have to reply “Let’s do it!” with great alacrity?

“Ah, umm...”

“Don’t give us any hints, you’ll spoil the fun. Yumi-chan and Sachiko should stay silent.” There aren’t any hints. Because there is no candidate. Even if she had wanted to give a hint, she could not have done so.

It was just too ridiculous. Sachiko-sama silently took out a paperback book and began to read. Already, one had escaped. If possible, Yumi wanted to escape too but the Sei-sama sitting next to her reached out and gripped her arm tightly. She was forcibly dragged in by her peer. Apparently, while seeing Yumi’s reaction, she had anticipated such a contingency. She seemed persistent, but after seeing her complexion, she knew Yumi wouldn’t be able to offer a hint.

“Ah, so it’s me.” Sei-sama won at Rock, Paper, Scissors. First of all, she pointed. “From the side facing us, the girl in the third row.”

“That girl who is pinning back her bangs? No, Sei. That’s a second year. You’ve probably seen her: she’s in the Newspaper Club.”

“Ah, That’s Tsukiyama Minako’s little sister. Well, how about the girl next to her.” That neighbor happened to be the newspaper club’s rookie, Hidemi-chan. It wasn’t that the possibility didn’t exist, but she probably hadn’t become Yoshino’s little sister. Since she had been instructed not to give hints, she of course didn’t say that.

Next it was Yōko-sama’s turn to choose. “What about the girl sitting next to Shimako? Certainly, she had gone to the Yamayurikai’s play.”

“Unfortunately, that’s Shimako’s little sister,” Sei-sama answered.

“Ah, yes...” Yōko-sama and Eriko-sama nodded at the same time. Shimako gave them a worried glance and bowed in their direction. Noriko followed suit and bowed her head.

“They look just like a Japanese person and a westerner.” The former Roses were cracking up at the joke. For Shimako who was in a far-off seat this reaction was probably unexpected.

“What about the girl standing next to Camera-chan? Is that her little sister?” Yōko-sama asked Yumi. When she looked, Tsutako-san, who had just entered the assembly hall, was accompanied by Shōko-chan.

“I haven’t heard. She’s definitely a first year, but...”

“Right. Well, she gets my vote because she has a cute face.”

“...Huh?” In the end, they were just screwing around. From a first impression, there was nothing to base such a judgment on but her face and the way she carried herself. But, Yōko-sama chose people based on their face. It had come to Yumi as a bit of a shock. She was an unexpected pushover for a pretty face. But she had already proved this by making Sachiko her little sister.

When Yōko-sama made this declaration about Shōko-chan, Eriko-sama hummed to herself. “That girl next to Camera-chan, I think I’ve seen her before. I can’t remember from where.” Since Shōko-chan is Naito Katsumi-sama’s real younger sister, it was likely that Shōko’s features might resemble her sister’s in some respects. Or mightn’t she have actually met her before? Because the former Roses had graduated at the same time that girl had entered high school, there shouldn’t have been a point of contact. Although Eriko-sama thought it over for a minute, eventually she gave up in lieu of a renewed search for Yoshino-san’s little sister.

“My last try. Let’s make it either of those two over there.” With that, she pointed, and Yōko-sama replied, “Ah! One of them is Yūko-chan’s daughter.” And the other of the two was definitely Tōko-chan. They were two people sitting next to each other, so one could even assume that they came together. But at what point had they formed a relationship? Up until today, they should have been natural enemies...

“Yōko, how is it you know her mother’s name?” Eriko-sama inquired. Sei-sama laughed.

“I also know it. That one over there she called Yūko-chan’s daughter... Certainly, that’s Kanako-chan, isn’t it?” Seeing the expression on Yumi’s face she knew it had been confirmed. She couldn’t help making the, “Ding-dong. That’s a correct answer” expression. “I... Believe I was made late because of those people? That’s right. Last year about this time, there was something like this. Could it be *déjà vu*?” But it wasn’t *déjà vu*. Indeed, while being hospitalized for her wisdom teeth, Eriko-sama said that even a big incident might go unnoticed on a small school campus. Here was a person who carried a unique history.

“And? That Yūko-chan’s daughter, Kanako-chan, is a first-year, yes?”

“That’s right. But Kanako-chan is a different story.”

“Eh? Different story?”

“She wouldn’t be Yoshino-chan’s little sister, is what I mean. Kanako-chan likes Yūko-chan.”

“She has a complex for her mother?!”

“Yeah, that’s the feeling I get.” As Eriko-sama didn’t know Kanako-chan’s circumstances, Sei-sama and Yōko-sama enjoyed her confusion.

“What about the girl next to her?”

“That’s Electric Drill-chan. That girl also isn’t really Yoshino-chan’s type.” Pointing at the student, she completely threw out this idea. Eriko-sama finally said, “She’s just not here.” In reality, there were plenty of other Lillian students who had not been mentioned. Apparently the difference between the amount of personal information available on Yumi and her best friend is quite amusing.

At which point, Sei-sama said, “Well then, you may choose one person regardless of uniform or school year.” Hey, hey. Gradually, the object of the search was changing. This idea penetrated Yumi’s consciousness and lingered. When it came to finding Yoshino’s little sister, what would happen if you remove only the lowest condition of that person being a first-year in Lillian High School?

“Umm... I think that girl.” Eriko-sama recovered her good humor and pointed at a girl. This was an opponent from the opposite side. She was far away, but because she was in front, she was visible. It was a girl who had semi-long, all one length hair.

“Go on.” Yōko-sama grinned.

“What?”

“I like the type of person who resembles me.”

“Resembles?”

“More so her bearing than her face.”

Sei-sama took this in stride and said, “If she wears a barrette and had a more prominent forehead... I think her face would look alike too.”

“Sigh. Well then, by all means I want to recommend her to Yoshino-chan.” Apparently not as dissatisfied as she lead us to believe, Eriko-sama laughed. She tried to imagine introducing a girl to Yoshino-san to be her little sister based on the fact that she looked like her. It surely would be a pleasant thing.

“I regret that she’s wearing plain clothes.”

“To make matters worse, she’s an opponent.” True. Eriko-sama decided that Yoshino-san’s little sister would not only wear a baby pink sweatshirt, but was also hidden amongst a group of students from the rival school, Ohnaka.

“That wouldn’t go well.” Eriko-sama sighed regrettably. Although she wanted to, she couldn’t force Yoshino-san to take that girl. However, the three former Roses were able to enjoy themselves for ten minutes before the match began.

“I’m looking forward to this.” Players and referees were showing up at staging area. Rei-sama and company were behind those players. She was also able to confirm the appearance of Yoshino-san carrying their luggage.

Sachiko-sama put a bookmark in her paperback book and shut it. At last, it was 2 o’clock; the match had begun.

Part 2.

While being a standby player in back for the match, Yoshino-san quietly sighed, “Fuu.” Basically a standby player amounted to doing little to nothing. If she wanted to participate and represent her school, she had to be a rank-holding member. And as such, she would have had bout-experience. She would be accustomed to this sort of thing. At which point, she could easily put on her own hakama and protector. So she understood that with these girls, if she tried to lend a hand, rather than helping out, she’d be told she was, “in the way.” The way a mood builds before a match: it reflects the pace of the participants. Until they ask for your help, there’s nothing you can do, seems to be the right approach.

In other words, watching the match and guarding their luggage was Yoshino’s primary task for today. However, Rei-chan had said, “Yoshino should come to the assembly hall. There’s great significance in seeing the match up-close.” Was it that only when Yoshino was nearby, could Rei-chan put her strength in context? If that was what was meant by significance, she was honestly delighted. But how is “observing the match” practice? Earnestly watching another person’s match: she had definitely called this practice. Especially watching the high school intramural match is practice, given that normally you can’t observe another school’s style. Therefore this is an ideal opportunity. By all means, she should burn this into her memory. She should absorb anything she could.

She hadn’t said any of this, but it was understood. Yoshino’s hobby was spectator sports. No matter what game it is, watching it raw from up close is the greatest happiness, to say nothing of giving her whole attention to Kendo.

(And yet... It’s no good.)

Right before her eyes there was Lillian’s second guard, even brandishing a **shinai...** Yoshino was not able to concentrate at all. Next to her, sitting in the stands was Tanuma Chisato. She was bent forward in curiosity, almost to the point of falling over cheering them on.

After this was over, she would have to meet Eriko-sama. Was it possible that Eriko-sama might have completely forgotten their arrangement? By chance, had she memorized the day of the high school exchange match for their meeting by mistake? Yet, such fragile wishful thinking was shattered the moment she spotted that lovely figure seated in the assembly hall guest seating.

That's right. That person doesn't give up her little amusements quite so easily. There is no way she had remembered incorrectly. When Eriko-sama finished watching Rei-chan's match, she stood up and slowly and left the hall. She too was performing a kind of standby. The group of girls from the Lillian Kendo Club were leaving the assembly hall, so she followed. But just then, Rei-chan called out. So the moment she started passing through the entryway, she stopped.

"That reminds me," Rei said as she recalled something. "Why hasn't Yoshino-chan chosen a little sister?" (Ah.) That detail had stayed with her throughout. When she thought that in the not so distant future, that reality would actually occur... It would be really impossible to concentrate on a match. (Oh brother.)

When she comes to realize that Yoshino doesn't have a little sister yet, Eriko-sama would have a triumphant face. Even just imaging it made her angry. She understood it was unwise to choose a little sister recklessly. However, since Eriko-sama was a former rival, it was not in her nature to lose face by begging forgiveness and saying, "I'm sorry."

(Speaking of which, who won the **Vanguard** I can't even remember that. "Chisato-san. This is still just the prelims, right?" She asked since she was suddenly worried.

"Right..."

Her face must have seemed very odd. As expected. She was relieved that her memory was not totally bombed out. Settle down. The opponent's school name was written on their loin guards: the character's written there were "Takarazawa." Certainly, last year that school had not participated.

Last year.

It hadn't been possible for her to come to the high school exchange tournament last year... Because that day she had had surgery on her heart. Before the surgery, she couldn't have imagined that she would be able to watch Rei-chan's match as a member of the Kendo Club only one year later.

She had no idea Eriko-sama would be so persistently malicious after graduation. (But, well. She had been able to oppose her. It was evidence that her health had become robust.) Opposition? At this point, Yoshino thought such opposition had become hopeless. After today, how could she continue to fight? If it came to this, should she thrust out a captured Lillian student and call her "my little sister?" Or, could the excuse be that her little sister couldn't come today because it would complicate her cold? But what if she thought it was a feigned illness?

"It's over."

"Huh?"

"The Vanguard won the match, but the Second-Vanguard lost. The Center won, the Second-in-Command won and the Captain won. So, we passed the prelims," Tanuma Chisato told me and she seemed amazed. "Hey, wake up. Apart from the winning move, it's not possible to call each of these a victory or defeat. I'm discouraged by Rei-sama."

"Thank you, I'm indebted to you." A victory, a defeat, a victory, a victory and a victory. All right, I can remember that.

The place where Rei-chan decided to put her mask, she thought she'd seen it. Since after the match she really couldn't remember, it was painful. When she didn't take the time to read the final scores for Lillian, it was starting to feel really awkward. The results were, for the most part, what she expected: Lillian Girl's School and Ohnaka Girl's High won and were able to advance. (You bet your ass they were!)

The second and third daughters of the three Tanaka sisters of Ohnaka. Since the second daughter appeared to be the captain, she was arranged to strike at Rei-chan (baring the fangs of their fighting spirit).

Last year it was decided that Rei-chan had defeated her real older sister in the last seconds. So, doesn't this seem like it would be revenge? Even the three Centers were burning up in revenge. Yoshino also felt burned up and wanted to return the favor. The Tanaka sisters also weren't players in this: it seemed the bottom ranks didn't count. It hadn't been quite possible notice-somehow she'd been seriously stricken. When the match was over, she would tidy things up and run away from this place, Yoshino decided.

After running away, she had only to think things through. Could she play hide-and-seek from Eriko-sama until she gave up and went home? On the way out, could she persuade a first year Lillian student to pretend to be her little sister? She decided to cross that bridge when she came to it. Having tentatively decided this, from then on it seemed she was somehow able to watch the rest of the match.

The final match to determine the winner between Ohnaka Girl's High School and Lillian Girl's Academy was finally starting. Rei-chan's triumphant win, she must properly burn it into her memory.

Part 3.

“...”

Which was worse: the loser being in the victorious school, or the victor being in the losing school? No way can the final game of a tournament come to this resolution. Yoshino couldn't find the words to describe the participants. But, she couldn't have imagined that Lillian would be defeated. In a novel or television drama, the protagonist must, while suffering, disregard failures or accidents, and in the end, obtain victory no matter what. Therefore, it's not that Lillian was defeated. Somewhere in her heart, she believed this.

However, the heroines in this story were the Ohnaka Kendo Club members. It was probably the same as saying: in the preliminaries, Takarazawa High School and Tsukimigaoka High School were defeated. The way you see the world varies greatly depending on where you stand.

Rei-chan won, but Lillian had lost. The win was decided at the point when her comrade, the Second in Command, finished. There had already been three wins: the Vanguard, the Second Guard and the Second in Command. It had already been decided that Ohnaka had the overall victory before their match.

“Rei-chan looked so cool.”

“Yeah. I did.”

Rei-chan was unexpectedly relieved. Defeated players had room to improve. In being defeated today, she will grow stronger for tomorrow. It made her want to cry.

Speaking of being made to cry, the overall victory went to Ohnaka's captain, Tanaka-san (the second daughter). She was red-faced and puffy-cheeked and cried out loud. Even though she was favored, she wasn't crying for joy. You could see that she was mortified to have been defeated by Rei-chan. As she was leaving, her team members and a person who looked to be the advising teacher surrounded the girl.

Because of this and that, Yoshino was late in leaving. In theory, right after the match finished, she had planned to vanish into thin air. She panicked: until a little while ago Yoshino had seen Eriko-sama sitting nearby. The three courtly looking ladies had been lined up: in between Sei-sama and Yōko-sama there was now a vacant seat.

(Crap!) What should she do? Should she carry out her previous plan, or somehow modify it? While hesitating, her eyes ran across the entire audience. Eriko-sama's disappearance had stalled her. Because it was immediately following the end of the match, there was a considerable wave of people heading toward the exit. She wasn't able to get through.

"I'm sorry, I'm going on ahead." Yoshino thrust the club's luggage to Tanuma Chisato. She then took off in a dash. If she cut across the sparing area, she'd be able to reach an exit before Eriko-sama.

"Hey, wait. Yoshino!" she heard coming from the mass exodus. It was unmistakably Eriko-sama's angry voice. Yoshino began to run. That person had already spotted her.

"Excuse me, I need to get through." Yoshino separated the stampeding crowd in the vicinity of the exit with those words. Somehow a passage appeared toward the gym's exit. (Right? Or Left?) The right fork leads to a staircase. On the left was a lobby, with the foyer and doors for exiting the building. If I was forced to describe my chances, I'd say the left was more crowded, but not by a tremendous amount.

"All right, I've decided." Yoshino chose to go right. Because traffic on the upper levels was prohibited, they were roped off. She could only go down. But, certainly there should be a washroom down there. If she entered the private room, how long could she remain there? Eriko-sama wasn't likely to kick the door in.

“Yoshino-chan!” When she went down the stairs, there came a voice from behind calling her to stop. It was not necessary to turn around to the speaker. That had been Eriko-sama’s voice. What kind of divine skill was she using to have escaped that mad rush? Was it time to pay the piper? No, she must not give up just yet. Although it was true she had run away, the matter of her little sister was still uncertain.

“Eriko-sama.” Yoshino turned around slowly. “Good day.”

“Where were you going in such a rush?” Basically, she had run away, but she couldn’t say such an unkind thing to Eriko-sama so directly.

“Umm...”

“Oh, the bathroom?”

“Yes, That’s right. To the bathroom.”

“I see. It couldn’t be that you were running away from me because you couldn’t get a little sister. There’s no way Yoshino-chan could do such a thing, right?” When provoked by Eriko-sama, she slipped into a defensive posture every time.

“Oh, is Eriko-sama belittling me?” With this, Yoshino’s path of retreat was completely severed. It would now be impossible for her to be forgiven after a cute apology.

“So, you weren’t able to get a little sister?”

“O... Of course I was.” In reality, she wasn’t. However, she was no longer at the level of apology. Yoshino was quickly being chased down a dead-end street.

“By the way, was the rosary bought during your field trip?”

“Huh... No.”

“Ah, so you gave your little sister the one given to you by Rei?”

“Yeah.” If she stopped to give it much thought, even if she hadn’t bought the rosary during the field trip, there were various places she could have acquired it. But, being in a desperate situation, Yoshino didn’t catch on to the idea. Because she had not bought it in Italy, it followed that she would have given her little sister the rosary Rei-chan had given her. This was dreaming up a fanciful story. However...

“Well that’s odd. Isn’t that a rosary there?” Eriko-sama peeked into Yoshino’s collar with a finger. During the dash through the crowd, the rosary seems to have come out.

“Yes. It’s a rosary.” Yoshino showed her as if there was room to negotiate. She purposefully unfastened it from her neck. She rolled it on her palm from her right hand to her left hand and back again.

“You’re asking about this because you think we’ve had the ceremony. Actually, we haven’t done it yet.” Somehow something so random came out of her mouth so smoothly.

“Well, I’m not saying I’m glad about it. So, she’s ‘fundamentally’ your little sister?” That’s right. Except there wasn’t anyone known as her little sister, fundamentally or otherwise.

“My little sister is...” Yoshino looked away from Eriko-sama. Just over there was a poster with the characters for “washroom” written on a downward diagonal arrow. “...In the washroom right now.” Coming up with a response based on what she had seen was decidedly lacking in skill. Yet, when you have your back to the wall you have to use everything at your disposal.

“In the washroom?”

“I was quickly coming to find her because I was going to have her greet you. It’s not that I was going to the washroom for myself, it was actually for my little sister. Nevertheless she’s taking her time, I wonder if there’s a problem. I’ll go take a peek.” Yoshino ran down the stairs. Though, she didn’t check to see if Eriko-sama was following.

“Wait, I’ll come with you.”

“No, that’s not necessary.”

“No need to be so tactful.”

“Sure there is.” They single-mindedly descended the stairs, but had to cling to the wall to squeeze past two people coming up the stairs. They once again passed a sign marking the way to the washroom: this time pointing left.

(Left!) As she turned the corner she aimed for the washroom. Fortunately, the passageway was empty as they came to the end. She could twist around at once and throw her off. And then Yoshino turned.

In that moment, an unexpected person suddenly appeared. One might have said their paths collided. But, that person who was suddenly there dodged very easily. Only Yoshino, who suddenly threw on the emergency breaks, overbalanced and fell over.

“Owwwwwww.”

“Are you all right?” the person said as I looked up into her face. It was a girl wearing a pink sweatshirt with semi-long hair.

“What a pretty rosary.” When had she picked that up? She picked up the rosary Yoshino must have dropped in the moment that she fell. She held it up to the light and muttered to herself. She must have thought it was beautiful. Rei-chan had gotten it specifically for Yoshino. It was well chosen as it suited the color of her skin. The jungle green colored stone set in the chain was said to be lucky. While absent-mindedly watching the figure of this girl roll the rosary around in her palm, Yoshino thought, “this girl, why do I feel like I know her from somewhere?” Just where was it? It wasn’t at all clear. The memory was obscured but it wasn’t that she had completely forgotten. However, this may have been the first time she had directly spoken with this person.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I’ll return it.” The girl noticed her glance. Because she panicked and presented the rosary, Yoshino reached for her hand and was lifting the rosary. Just then, Eriko-sama appeared from around the corner. It coincided with the moment when the two girl’s hands were touching.

“Yoshino-cha...” Eriko-sama who had should have been chasing Yoshino, upon seeing the form of these two people, came to stand still as if her battery went dead. But Yoshino had also forgotten that she was supposed to have been running away.

“Is it possible, this girl...” At that moment, it finally dawned on Yoshino: Eriko-sama mistook this girl who happened to be here by chance for Yoshino’s little sister. She had gone to the washroom for her little sister and this girl who faced opposite her had come from there. Additionally, the two people both held the rosary in their hands.

“Yes, well...” Yoshino nodded. She nodded and lowered her eyes in that moment. She was convinced that heaven had supported her. The girl who stood next to Yoshino, all her eyes had told her was that she was wearing a pink sweatshirt. But actually, now it seemed she was wearing a Lillian uniform underneath. In a small voice to this girl she said, “Follow my lead.” After whispering she spoke to Eriko-sama.

“I’ll introduce you. She... This girl is who I’d like to have become my little sister.”

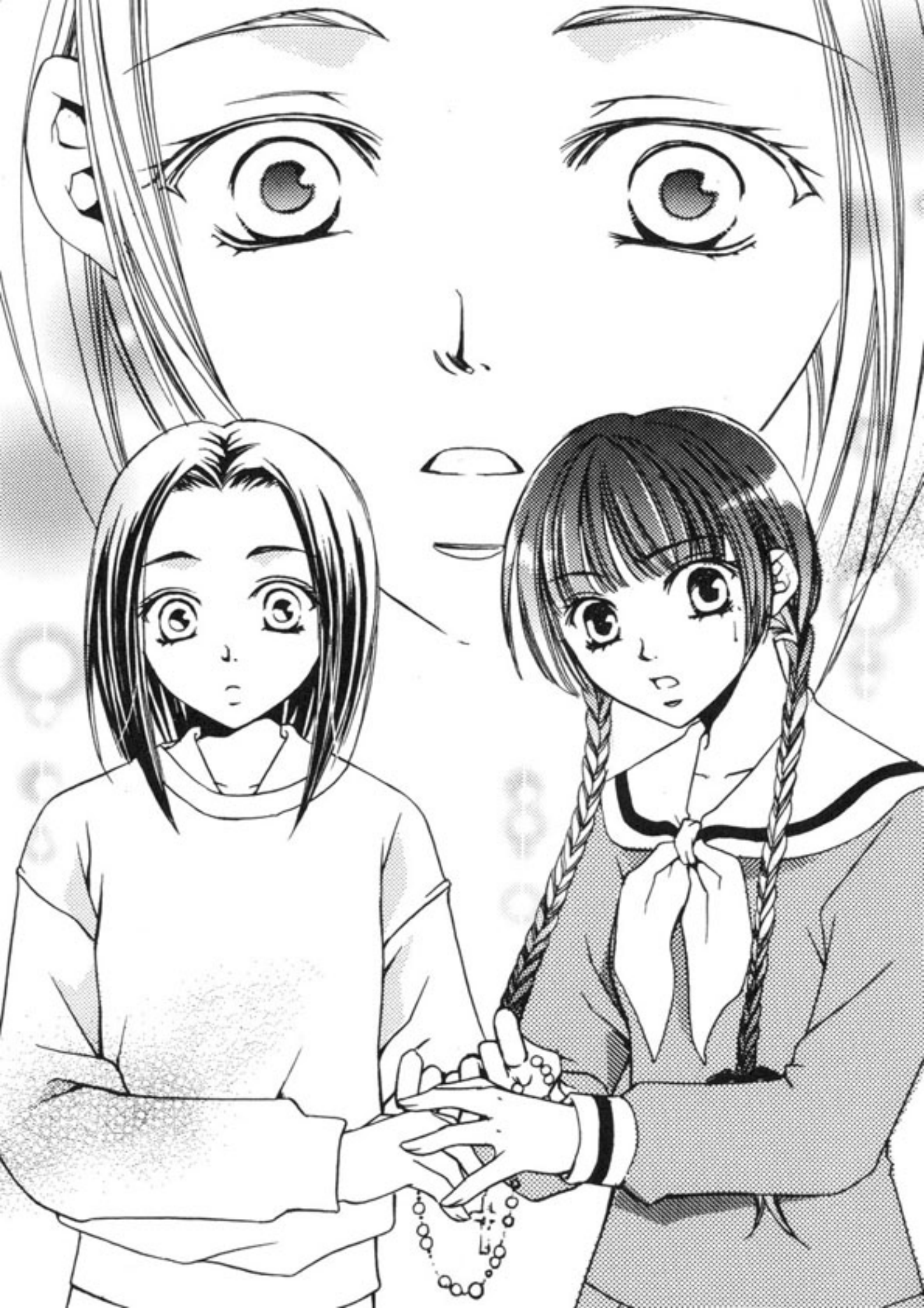
“I see.” Because the girl introduced herself before being asked for her name, Yoshino was honestly saved.

“I’m Arima Nana. It’s a pleasure meeting you.” A-ri-ma Nana. This was a name she’d not heard before. Spelled: “Possession Horse Vegetables Repeat Syllable” If I write out her name, it doesn’t turn on any light bulbs. So having thought she might have seen it recently somewhere, was maybe just her imagination.

“I see. Nana-chan, is it. I’ll remember.” Well, with that, she tried to take Nana and leave that place. As expected, Eriko-sama did not permit it.

“Won’t you perform the ceremony in my presence?”

“Um, that’s for a future date. Today was for introductions.” Performing the ceremony in Eriko-sama’s presence, she had certainly said something like that. But, she hadn’t said that should be today. This was a stopgap performance. When it came to giving away the rosary that she’d been given by Rei-chan, she didn’t want to put it around the neck of this unrelated girl.



“Why? Here’s an opportunity to have one, you shouldn’t let it drag on.” Does she doubt me? Or, is she just interested? Eriko-sama is considerably insistent.

“That’s... There are various circumstances.”

“Circumstances?” This time Eriko-sama didn’t look at Yoshino, but rather at Arima Nana. With this, Nana spoke.

“I’m sorry. The circumstances are mine: I can’t receive her rosary just now.”

“Those circumstances are somewhat bothersome.”

“It’s a bit of this and that.”

“A bit of this and that, huh.” Eriko-sama, in order to evaluate her, looked at Nana from head to toe. “I understand,” she said and nodded. “There are various reasons so we’ll consent to put it off.” Am I in the clear? Yoshino excitedly watched the outcome of events. But, Nana replied more calmly and more unexpectedly. Eriko-sama was finally made to shut up.

“Incidentally, Yoshino-chan. As I was saying at the sports festival: what happened to those anxious first-years?”

“Huh?” Because of that, this Arima Nana doesn’t fit? (It’s all a sham but...) What is it that Eriko-sama misunderstands?

“Well, that’s fine. Since this person has turned out to be rather interesting.” What is it that she had decided by herself? Eriko-sama grinned from ear to ear with meaning and she turned away.

“Well then. I guess I should be going. At this point, Yōko and Sei ought to be tired of waiting in the lobby.” Was it true that she had somehow ridden the tides of fate safely? Instinctively she would have given three cheers, but checked herself.

“Good day, Yoshino-chan. It was a treat to be introduced to your little sister. I’ll leave it alone for a while.”

“No need for such remarks; please come and visit any time,” while answering with a smile, Yoshino thought, “Do not come back for ten billion years”. Even as she thought about sticking out her tongue to the retreating figure, Eriko-sama suddenly turned back.

“Oh, that’s right... Nana-chan, was it?”

“Yes.”

“Your personal appearance is very neat. Please fix what’s under your sweatshirt.” Leaving with that message, Eriko-sama returned to her original course. At the point where she disappeared up the stairs, Yoshino thought “you’re safe now” and turned to thank Nana.

“Thank you. You’ve saved me.” However, Nana responded.

“...But, I didn’t, I don’t think. That person certainly saw through us.”

“What?”

“I’m unqualified.”

“Un... Qualified?” What’s this? In this case it must mean she doesn’t have the qualifications to become Yoshino’s little sister. But, in that meeting just now, in exchanging only a few words, how would she be able to judge whether or not the qualifications existed?

“Because the Lillian uniform stuck out, the sweatshirt helped things. But I screwed up. My ribbon came loose before I could notice.” Nana flipped up her sweatshirt so Yoshino could see. At that time, the thing greeted Yoshino’s eyes...

“Oh, you’re...” Although most of the uniform was the same as the one she wore, the chest was definitely different. “You’re a middle schooler?!” Yoshino stabbed a pointing finger and shouted. From the line of her sailor-collar a thin black ribbon was tied. That was the mark of Lillian’s Middle School.

“Yes, I’m a third year.”

“Oh.” Because she hadn’t meant to actually consider making this girl her little sister, she was not likely to care if she was in middle school or high school. She somehow knew at once her exhaustion. That fact that Eriko-sama had seen through to the truth only made things worse.

“Well then, I should also be going.” Nana raised her hand to the high school girl who seemed to be leading her out of the washroom.

“Hasekura Rei-sama’s little sister...” On the verge of separating herself, Nana called with a serious look. “Your little sister, will she receive that rosary?”

“Wha?” Nana left without waiting for an answer, appearing satisfied. If there had been enough time to give an answer, what could I have said? Yoshino’s heart throbbed. Even though nothing was done, this was the first time since her operation she was made to feel this way. Because she had been in such a state, even if she had been wearing an Ohnaka Girl’s uniform, she would take Nana. There was neither a “why?” nor any room for doubt.

Part 4.

“Yoshino-san.” When her shoulder was tapped, she came to her senses. Yumi-san stood there.

“What are you doing here?”

“I was told you were greeting Eriko-sama in front of the washroom. But more importantly, what happened? You’re spacing out. Even though I walked up to you from the front, you didn’t see me at all.”

“...Yeah.” It was as if she had been in a dream. When asked about her whereabouts, it seemed that Eriko-sama had chased her to somewhere around here.

Yet, if Eriko-sama sent Yumi-san to meet her, everything that happened had been real. By only chasing her, it wasn’t that Eriko-sama was liberating Yoshino. Then if the girl named Arima Nana doesn’t exist, it would be very amusing.

“So, how did it go?” Yumi asked, being somewhat excited. “Did Eriko-sama permit you to apologize?” There was nothing like an apology.

“I properly introduced her.”

“WHAT?! Who on earth would that be?” Had one of the little sister candidates come to the assembly hall? Since she was asked, she replied that neither had come. At which point, Yumi-san was considerably surprised. That was natural, considering this outcome surprised Yoshino most of all.

“Arima Nana.”

“Huh?”

“A girl named Arima Nana.”

“When did you... I, never heard any of this.” Yumi-san protested. At any rate, Eriko-sama had been introduced, and even if the information about such a first-year had reached Yumi first, regrettably there still wouldn’t have been any punishment. Well, as her best friend she naturally would have insisted but...

“I couldn’t have told you about her, because I just met her a little while ago.”

“...” To this, as one would expect, she was speechless.

“After today I’ll investigate what kind of a girl she is.”

“Yoshino-san... What on earth have you done?”

She presented Yumi-san with an anxiety-ridden face and answered only, “I’m not really sure.” What had really happened? She didn’t understand it very well. Nor did she really know what would happen in the future. “I can tell you one thing, however: I want Yumi-san to be able to get a little sister as soon as possible.”

“Huh, what’s that mean?”

“If and when there’s an emergency I’ll feel sorry for Noriko-chan.” An emergency... Perhaps there might be an alternative. At that moment, Yoshino was thinking about Sei-sama.

Harvest

Part 1.

“Various reasons’ she said. Really there were too many various problems with that girl.” Monday was dawning. That morning, Yumi of the second-year Pine group opened the door and entered. There she waited. There was no “good day” spoken to Yoshino. She took her to the corner of the room.

“Listen, Yumi-san. That Arima Nana, she’s Tanaka-san’s real little sister.”

“Tanaka-san, is it? Tanaka-san from which group?” Since Sunday was strategically placed between then and now, her feelings were able to completely reset. Who was Arima Nana again? It took some time to recall. Moreover, which **Tanaka-san** was this?

“Which Group? No, no. She’s not from Lillian, but from Ohnaka Girls’. The three Tanaka sisters of Ohnaka... Or is it four sisters? Anyway, she’s the youngest. When I thought I had seen here somewhere, it was in a photograph from a newspaper article that Rei-chan had pasted into her scrapbook.”

Of course, everyone understood and was ready for the conversation to advance... Except, unfortunately, this was the first time Yumi heard of the three-or-as-many-as-four Tanaka sisters of Ohnaka. The result was using her powers of imagination to their fullest extent to help her understand. In other words, Yoshino introduced a person named Arima Nana to Eriko-sama as her little sister. But she understood that it had something to do with the Tanaka-san from Ohnaka that Rei-chan met in the deciding tournament match.

“But, her name’s Arima, isn’t it?”

“That’s right. She said that hoping to deceive me.” Said it hoping to deceive you? She cocked her head in puzzlement.

“So, her name is Tanaka Arima Nana?”

“Her surname is Tanaka. Arima Nana is like her given name? It’s amazing.” Yoshino-san laughed through her nose. “Since her grandfather’s name is Arima, and she became her grandfather’s adopted daughter, she’s not a Tanaka. But, because all three generations live together, she is an adopted daughter only in name. Nothing has changed in the lives of the Tanaka sisters. When you say it’s different, that grandfather left the hope that she would enter Lillian.

“Huh.” In the period of two days since Saturday, Yoshino had investigated this a great deal.

“It isn’t ‘huh.’ What part of that did you not understand?”

“I didn’t understand any of it.” Yoshino’s reasoning was as follows: “Nana’s grandfather had a dojo that is by far larger than the Hasekura one, and he forever had many apprentices. From among many granddaughters, the youngest, Nana, was chosen to be adopted? After some future date, I’m thinking Nana succeeds him. Namely that Nana’s kendo ability is unmatched among her sisters. Is any of that right?”

Is that right? She asked to confirm worriedly. The intricacies of kendo, dojos, and adoptions were for the most part lost on Yumi.

“Well, should I give up? She would be a little sister who’s stronger than me.”

“...”

“To say nothing of the fact that she’s two years my junior. I shouldn’t make such a troublesome girl my little sister. And Rei-sama too: after she graduates she can’t come to love her sœur’s little sister.

“She’s not Rei-chan’s little sister, is she?” After I said that, Yoshino-san had a face that read, “Damn it!”

“I was right, I don’t like her.”

Yumi laughed. “You’ve been hooked with the sickle, huh?” Yoshino-san’s words seemed regretful.

“Oh dear.” While Yoshino-san was saying it was too problematic, in the end she wouldn’t be able to eliminate Arima Nana from the running. Once she came to see it, she’d understand. Now it was her turn to say, “Don’t make fun of your best friend. I have a special insight on such things.”

“Do I like her...?” Yoshino-san muttered. After that her questions turned inward and she quietly turned to look in the direction of the middle school building. At length she clearly declared: “I know. If I’m not able to get a little sister by the time I become a third year, at that point, I’ll make Arima Nana my little sister.”

Part 2.

“...That’s what I’m saying.” While walking on the gingko-lined street, Yumi reported to Sachiko-sama on the circumstances of Yoshino-san’s little sister strife. It was after school that day. Because there was no meeting today at the Rose Mansion, the Rosa Chinensis sisters were able to walk home together privately for the first time in a while.

“And then?” Sachiko-sama asked.

“And then...” She was being grilled more and more.

“That kind of thing.” A cool wind capriciously blew up some fallen leaves. In the small garden in which Maria-sama’s statue stands, there were many evergreens. Yet, what kind are those over there that adopt autumn colors and afterwards shed their leaves? It gave the appearance that Maria-sama was also able to change and appear desolate somehow. Although, Maria-sama with her always unchanging, easy smile is still able to watch over students.

“What did you think of that person?”

“I...” Her hand, united with her sister’s, worked restoratively on her and she was able to answer. “Today I visited the classroom of the three first years, I conveyed my displeasure with their not coming.”

“Even if you hadn’t intentionally sought them out, it was obvious that no one was planning to come.” The fact that they didn’t come to support Rei-sama’s match proved it, Sachiko-sama was saying.

If they weren’t able to go and help out, it’s not possible to reach out to them. She was determined to voice her thoughts though, as it was appropriate.

“But, I might have gone looking for them because I was worried.”

“...That’s true. Those girls, they might be feeling relieved. If the job had fallen to me, your approach would have seemed fairly softhearted in comparison.” Although they were just little sister candidates, Sachiko-sama had passed judgment on those first-

years. Even under the most relaxed circumstances, a person would be nervous being in a special place like the Rose Mansion. Maybe in that case they wouldn't be able to start off by saying, "I can't come anymore." Even if Yumi regretted that this opportunity hadn't born fruit, those girls were not burdened with such regrets. If it happens that they still end up coming to the Rose Mansion to help, and Yumi were to say to them, "it would be good if you didn't come", they were not likely to let it pass without objection. That was why.

"Well, it's all right." Sachiko-sama did not criticize any more than that. However, it seems that Yumi's task of finding a little sister was not being let off the hook. For the moment, she was just pardoned from it. That was the feeling she got.

"Huh? That's..." Sachiko-sama muttered. Yumi followed the point of her glance. Tsutako-san was facing the sports grounds. Shōko-chan's retreating figure appeared small walking between the trees. "What's this?" Sachiko-sama asked.

"I want to wait and see." Shōko-chan was hot on the heels of Tsutako-san and had finally entered the Photography Club. But, for the moment, that was the extent of it. So far Yumi hadn't heard anything like a story of a rosary being given or some such. It would have been Tsutako-san's place to say so, but there had been no reports of an increase in sœur being formed from the Tea Party.

Unexpectedly, there had been Mami-san and Hidemi-chan. Because they had originally been close friends in the Newspaper Club, with the Tea Party as a launch pad, she had thought about becoming an older sister. When she tried to imagine her ideal little sister, that girl must have seemed to be exactly like it. But those two were covering the event in the Lillian Kawaraban themselves. When the "Tea Party Sisters" count was tallied, they had stubbornly refused to be included. Even if they were happy together, it was probably embarrassing.

“Onee-sama, I...” Yumi wanted to convey what she was feeling right now to Sachiko-sama.

“I think it was good that we had the tea party. I didn’t find a little sister but, even from long beforehand I’ve always been seriously thinking about finding a little sister.”

“Oh, how so?”

“Nothing so complex. When you meet your partner, and you each think you’re in love. That’s the best way I think.”

“That’s true.” While walking, Sachiko-sama quietly nodded.

“I’m being simplistic: that feeling is unexpected and difficult but also the most important thing.” Love is the most important thing. Yet, as she spoke thusly, Yumi was talking to her most beloved person.

“Yumi.” Sachiko-sama said softly, and squeezed her hand. “Please find a little sister who thinks like that.”

“Yes.” Smiling, Yumi passed under the tall school gate. Invigorating, gentle, trying, heart throbbing. Does Onee-sama understand these feelings?